

CREATED BY
#1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

L. J.
Smith

WRITTEN BY AUBREY CLARK

The
Vampire
Diaries

THE SALVATION

VOL. 1

UNSEEN

The Vampire Diaries

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47NORTH

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The Vampire Diaries

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A Note About the Hashtags in This Book

Elena's diary may be private, but this book doesn't have to be. Everyone's talking about the biggest shockers, twists, and swoon-worthy moments.

Look for the hashtags throughout this book and share your own reactions on Twitter. To connect with other readers right now, tag your tweets with #TVD11.



Dear Damon,

Yesterday, I felt happy. Not my usual everyday glow, but a wild, fierce happiness that ran along my veins like fire.

I would have known, even without the slight tug of the bond between us, that it came from you. It felt like you. What were you doing? Where were you yesterday?

I'm glad you're happy, Damon.

I miss you. Thanks to the bond the Guardians forged, we're never really far away from each other. I'm constantly aware of you, with a low-level hum of Damon-ness running through me. But I'd like to see you in person.

I can't believe it's been four years. I think of how we said goodbye, that last evening at Dalcrest, the bond between our auras so new, and how I cried, and I keep wishing I could have convinced you to stay.

Stefan misses you, too. We keep saying that soon, we'll take a few weeks and come find you, wherever you happen to be. Stefan can show me around streets he hasn't walked for centuries, and you can take us to the hottest nightclubs, and we'll all be together again. Family.

Sometimes I feel like I'm losing so much of my past. Aunt Judith told me yesterday that she wants to sell our house in Fell's Church and move to Richmond. It makes sense: Robert won't have so far to commute, and my little sister can go to a terrific school in the city. And after all, I don't live there anymore.

But I can't help remembering how my mother and I redecorated

my bedroom there before she died, how many nights Bonnie and Meredith and Caroline and I spent there, having sleepovers and telling secrets. How you and Stefan each held me in your arms there, at different times and for different reasons.

I can say good-bye to that house, even though it hurts, but I can't say good-bye to you, too. Please, Damon, promise me we'll see each other again.

Elena Gilbert groaned and ran her fingers through her long blond hair. Why was it so hard to get to the point? She was getting distracted by her emotions, when she had meant to e-mail Damon for a reason.

But you already know I miss you, she typed. Now there's something I have to warn you about.

Elena looked up from the laptop, glancing around her living room. Everything in her and Stefan's apartment was serene. Warm, golden lamplight illuminated the pale walls lined with framed reproductions from art exhibits she and Stefan had attended: an abstract of a couple embracing, their bodies melting into each other; a stern-faced Renaissance angel; a field full of wildflowers. Elena's little sister, Margaret, grinned up from her elementary school graduation picture on a table by the couch; in another photo, Bonnie and Elena stood in silver bridesmaids' gowns on either side of Meredith, whose face was lit up in a rare smile. Heavy brocaded curtains covered the windows, shutting out the darkness. Sammy, their long-furred white cat, stretched out luxuriously across the couch cushions, only a sliver of one golden eye showing he was awake.

On the top of a heavy mahogany cabinet rested the small collection of things Stefan had carried with him through all his years of roaming the world: a few gold coins, an ivory-hilted dagger, a stone cup mounted in silver, a gold pendant watch, and a small iron coffer. And finally, the most recent addition to his treasures: a silky apricot-colored hair ribbon, stained with mud, which Elena had once lost in a graveyard.

Elena remembered when she'd first seen these objects in Stefan's rooms in Fell's Church, back when he had been a mysterious, almost frightening, stranger. Now she knew the story behind each of them, understood all these talismans of Stefan's past.

The quiet apartment was practically the exact opposite of wherever Damon was right now, which was probably full of bright lights and fast cars. Elena had been so restless for so long—but, here, in the home she and Stefan

had made together, she was content.

Of course, they were never completely safe. But since Klaus's defeat five years before, nothing more dangerous than a rogue young werewolf or newly made vampire had been drawn to the ley lines that crossed the Dalcrest area. They'd had to go farther afield to fight true evil; here they felt protected.

And she was happy. Mostly.

There was just ... a persistent sense of danger that had been creeping up on her lately, invading her dreams with shadows, tugging insistently at the corners of her mind. And in the middle of this danger, she repeatedly sensed Damon's dark, fiery presence.

Frowning, she began to type again.

Wherever you are now, Damon, please be careful. I just know that something is wrong. I've tried and tried to find out what it is—stretched my Guardian Powers to their limit and even called Andrés in Costa Rica to see if he knew a way to pinpoint what I'm sensing—but I can't figure it out.

All I know is that something awful is going to happen. And, somehow, you're involved. Please, Damon, be careful. I need you to be safe.

Elena hit "send" on the e-mail just as a key rattled in the lock. Sammy leaped from the couch in one smooth flow of movement. Elena jumped up, too, and hurried toward the door.

"Stefan!" she exclaimed, pulling it open. "Welcome home!"

Even though Stefan felt as familiar and as essential as breathing by now, sometimes the sight of him still knocked Elena back a step. He was just so beautiful, with his classical Roman profile, his dark curls that made her want to tangle her fingers in them. His bottom lip dipped into a sensual curve as he smiled at her, his face opening in a way only Elena ever got to see, and she ran forward to kiss him. She threw all her love into the kiss and felt Stefan's love in response, warm and reassuring.

Sammy twined around their ankles, sniffing Stefan, and then stalked away, his tail waving.

Finally Elena pulled back to look Stefan over and saw that, despite the dark shadows under his leaf-green eyes, his face was serene. The hunt had gone well, then. He was safe; Meredith was safe. Elena sighed gratefully and

laid her head against Stefan's shoulder. He was home, and everything would be okay.

His arms tightened around her. The leather of his jacket was smooth under her cheek. Then she felt something sticky against her face. "Stefan?" she asked, pulling back and touching the wet spot on his black leather jacket. Her fingers came away red with blood. "Stefan?" she asked again, her voice rising, and began to feel frantically over his chest and sides, looking for injuries.

"Elena, it's okay." Stefan took her hands. "It's not my blood." His smile widened. "We killed Celine."

Elena sucked in a breath of surprise. They'd been hunting Celine for months. She was an Old One, one of the Original vampires—an ancient, vicious monster who'd stalked the night of every continent for countless centuries. Celine was the last of the three Old Ones they'd been able to find traces of, the last they'd needed to kill to make this part of the world safe.

At first, Elena had tracked her with Stefan and Meredith ...



"Watch your head," Stefan told Elena, holding back a trailing vine for her to duck under. Behind it was an ominous, dark opening, the entrance to a hidden cave. Meredith followed them inside, her stave held at shoulder level in one hand, ready to strike. Stefan's stave dangled more carelessly, held loosely in his grip.

"Celine's here; I'm sure of it," Elena said. She could feel the Old One's presence, could see the trail of Celine's aura, peacock blue twisted with gold and black, tarnished with the sickening rust red of old blood. "She's really powerful," Elena whispered. "And she knows we're coming."

"Terrific," Meredith muttered. They carefully felt their way down the tunnel, half-blind in the darkness, Stefan leading the way. The ground was rocky and uneven underfoot. Elena pressed her hands against the cold stone walls to keep from falling. The tunnel led deeper and deeper underground, and Elena breathed slowly, trying not to think about the tons of earth and stone above her.

"It's okay," Stefan murmured, squeezing her hand. "She can't hurt you." Nothing supernatural could hurt Elena—a benefit of her Guardian Powers, and one they had to keep secret.

On the silver spikes at the ends of each stave was a telltale darkness—tiny amounts of Elena's own blood, poison to any Old One. Only her blood would kill Celine; only she could track Celine's aura. And she could feel her other

Guardian Powers readying for the fight, gathering like thunderclouds.

Elena was ready. She wasn't afraid, she told herself fiercely. Stefan was right. Nothing supernatural could kill her.

They stepped cautiously around a curve in the tunnel and blinked, dazzled by a sudden flood of light. The sun shone through an opening somewhere high overhead, hitting the crystals that studded the cavern's walls, sending brilliant shafts of light everywhere. It took Elena a moment to realize there was a figure in the middle of the room, a pillar of darkness in the light.

The vampire stood as still and upright as a statue, her thick dark hair hanging heavy and long around her shoulders. Her aura swirled around her, tracing gold and rust red across her features, as though she were dripping with blood. She looked young, her face smooth and serene—until she raised her eyes to meet Elena's.

Her eyes were dark, empty—and old, very old. These were eyes that had seen civilizations rise from tiny villages to great cities and then fall into ashes, over and over again. Celine's delicate eyebrows arched, expectant and amused, as she gazed at them.

Elena stayed still in the entrance while Stefan and Meredith fanned out, heading in opposite directions along the side of the cavern, their staves poised, watching for their chance. Celine was too powerful for them to attack head-on, but if she were distracted, or if Elena used her Guardian Power against her ... Meredith caught Elena's eye, and Elena reached for her Power, understanding. Could she hold the Old One still long enough for one of the others to strike?

Celine stayed motionless, those cruel dark eyes fixed only on Elena. She can't hurt me, Elena reminded herself. She took a deep breath and managed to snag the right trigger for her Power, like pulling a string. The energy gathering in her mind began to coalesce. She centered it, feeling the Power as solid as an arrow, directing it at Celine.

The Old One's lips quirked into a smile. "I don't think so, little Guardian," she said, her voice rich with laughter. "I know your secret."

She raised one hand and made a quick plucking gesture at the ceiling. A heavy crack rang out through the air as the stone ceiling above them began to split.

"Elena, run!" Stefan shouted. Before she could move, the rocks began plummeting down.

"Stefan ..." she managed to say, just as everything went black.



Elena winced, remembering how she'd woken up with a bad concussion, Celine long gone. After that, Stefan and Meredith had refused to let her come on the hunts. Since Celine somehow knew Elena could be killed by natural means—like a rock slide—but not supernatural ones, they thought it was too dangerous to let her get anywhere near the Old One. Elena had wielded her Guardian Powers from a distance, just as Bonnie and Alaric had researched and used magic to try to track Celine.

But now Celine was dead.

Ignoring the bloodstains, Elena tugged Stefan to her and kissed him, tenderly at first and then more deeply. “You did it. You’re wonderful,” she murmured against his lips.

She felt his mouth twitch into a smile, and he pulled back, cupping her cheek in one hand as he looked into her eyes, his clear-eyed gaze so full of love that Elena felt light-headed. “We couldn’t have done it without you,” he said.

“Well, *yeah*,” Elena joked, glancing down at the slim leather case at their feet, which held Stefan’s stave, the tiny silver hypodermics at each end filled with her deadly blood.

“More than just that,” Stefan said, shaking his head. “I couldn’t have done any of this without you. Elena, everything I do is because of you.” His eyes shone, and he ran his fingers softly over her cheek. “And you’re safe. This is the end. Now that Celine is dead, there are no more Old Ones.”

“Not that we know of,” Elena said, twisting her lips ruefully. If there was one thing she had learned over the past few years, it was that it was never truly over.

“But we’re safe for now.” He kissed her again, his body solid against hers. Elena let herself fall into the kiss. Their minds intertwined, sending each other love and desire, and then she reluctantly pulled away.

“We need to leave for Bonnie’s birthday party in a few minutes,” she said firmly.

Stefan smiled and pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head before stepping back. “It’s okay,” he said. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

He headed for the bathroom to wash up, his stride loose and relaxed.

Elena looked after him thoughtfully. It was true. Now that Elena had drunk from the Fountain of Eternal Youth and Life, she would be beside Stefan forever. They had all the time in the world.

She knew she should be content. But with every steady beat of her heart,

she couldn't help returning to the apprehension in the back of her mind. Despite their shared immortality, despite Celine's death, Elena had a bad feeling that time was running out.

Today, Bonnie felt happy. She had woken up to Zander cooking her a delicious breakfast, and the sun shining in her honor, on what really felt like the first day of summer. And then her entire kindergarten class sang “Happy Birthday” and presented her with a giant card that included twenty-one little painted handprints and twenty-one names, from Astrid to Zachary, printed in little-kid wobbly letters that she, Bonnie, had personally taught them to make over the course of the year.

“It was the cutest thing ever,” Bonnie said, gazing happily around at her assembled friends. “One of the moms even baked me cupcakes.”

And now she got to sit on a velvet chaise longue in a lovely bar full of Christmas lights and pink cocktails and enjoy herself.

Meredith, elegant as ever in a classic black dress, handed Bonnie a bubbling glass of champagne as she sat down beside her. Meredith’s husband of six months, Alaric, patted Bonnie’s shoulder affectionately before turning to pull over a seat of his own.

“Your class sounds adorable,” Meredith said. “But I think *the cutest thing ever* might be that you got Zander to come to a cocktail lounge called the Beauty Mark.”

“Zander likes to make me happy,” Bonnie said simply. She glanced over to where her boyfriend straddled a tiny ornate golden chair with a pink leopard-print seat. She watched as Zander tilted the chair onto two legs and flung his arms wide, saying something to his Packmate Jared. The chair creaked and wobbled alarmingly under his weight. Bonnie winced. “It’s possible this isn’t his natural setting, though,” she admitted.

Werewolf guys always seemed too big and rowdy to be inside, as if they might accidentally break things. Werewolf *girls*, on the other hand ... Zander’s second in command, Shay, met Bonnie’s gaze and raised her own

glass in a silent toast. Shay didn't get to do girly stuff much and looked like she was enjoying herself. Bonnie squinted a little, catching a glimmer from Shay's pale skin. Was she wearing *body glitter*?

"Thank God Shay started dating Jared, right?" Elena said, plopping down on Bonnie's other side and following her gaze. Stefan, standing beside them, inclined his head to Bonnie in what was almost a formal bow.

"Happy birthday, Bonnie," he said solemnly, handing her two packages. The larger one was wrapped in polka-dot paper and tied with a pink bow; the smaller was much heavier and wrapped in a dark silk that shimmered with subtle rainbows.

"The big one's from us," Elena said. "The other one's from Damon. He sent it to us to give to you."

"Ooh, thank you," Bonnie said, looking at the packages with interest. She'd never gotten a gift from Damon before, but she had a feeling it would be something special. Damon was so elegant, so sophisticated, so intriguing, with his sleek dark hair and sharp smile that every so often softened for Bonnie ... he was unlikely to give a girl, say, a DVD. Not that there was anything wrong with a DVD.

She politely opened Elena and Stefan's present first: a delicate filmy top she'd had her eye on when she'd gone shopping with Elena a couple of weeks earlier. "Gorgeous," she said with a wink, holding it up to herself amid a chorus of approval. "Thank you so much." She held out her wrist to Elena and Meredith, showing them a bracelet of gold filigree dotted with semiprecious stones. "Look at what Zander gave me! *And* he got me about a year's supply of dittany of Crete—an herb, for charm making," she added, for Elena's benefit. "It's really hard to find. He must have had to order it especially for me."

"It's beautiful," Elena said, and Meredith nodded approvingly. For such a *guy's guy*, Bonnie reflected, Zander was surprisingly good at buying presents for a girl. At least if that girl was Bonnie.

She couldn't concentrate on Zander's many wonderful qualities just now, though, not with a mysterious package from Damon in her lap, waiting to be opened.

She carefully unwrapped the silk. Inside was a small, rounded box that fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. It looked almost like a river rock, polished gray with a slight blue sheen to it. Opening the box, she found inside a delicate carved bird, in the same bluish-gray material, on a thin silver chain. There was also a note on thick, creamy paper, folded small.

“Wow,” Elena said, bending to peer more closely at the bird. “What is it? It looks old.”

Bonnie unfolded the note. In Damon’s elegant script, she read:

My little redbird, congratulations on reaching the age of twenty-four. It’s still ridiculously young, but at least you’re not a child anymore. The enclosed comes from Egypt, and is older even than me. The bird is a falcon. A witch I met in Luxor tells me that it represents power, wisdom, and guardianship—all of which I wish for you. Be strong, be wise, be safe.

Bonnie smiled. Damon could be surprisingly sweet and sentimental sometimes.

Underneath, in a different ink, scribbled in as if he’d added it at the last minute, was:

I hear you’re still running around with the overgrown wolf boy. Tell him to behave himself or he’ll answer to me.

Still sort of sweet, Bonnie decided, and tucked the note in her pocket.

“Here, let me fasten it.” Zander came over and swept her hair aside, hooking the necklace firmly and then placing a swift kiss on the back of her neck.

“Damon called you an overgrown wolf boy,” Bonnie told him. “You’re supposed to behave yourself.”

“Aw, he mentioned me?” Zander said affably. “I’m touched.”

Jared snorted, and Shay’s eyes narrowed. Most of Zander’s Pack had never really understood Damon.

Or, Bonnie admitted to herself, they’d understood him too well. When the Pack had met Damon, he’d been going through a ... difficult time. Truthfully, he’d been dangerous, and despite the fact that he’d fought beside them once or twice against greater threats, the small band of Original werewolves that protected the Dalcrest area didn’t trust him.

But now that the Guardians had connected him and Elena, he wasn’t so dangerous anymore. Because if Damon ever harmed a human, it would hurt Elena. If he killed anyone, Elena would die. And anyone who had seen

Damon's fierce desperation when Elena was in danger knew he would never hurt her.

Besides, Bonnie thought pragmatically, the falcon weighing cool against her neck, it seemed like Damon was gone for good. Part of her missed him—there'd always been a special connection between her and Damon—but it might be better here without him. It was certainly calmer.

"Matt's here," Stefan said, glancing up from murmuring into Elena's ear. You could never surprise a vampire, Bonnie thought wryly.

But now they all saw Matt working his way over to their corner of the bar. He kissed Bonnie on the cheek and handed her a small package. "Hey," he said. "Happy birthday. Sorry I'm late."

"No problem," Bonnie said, surreptitiously feeling the present to see what it was. A DVD, she thought. "Where's Jasmine?"

Matt grimaced. "She really wanted to come, but she's on call for the emergency room," he said. "She said to tell you happy birthday and she'll take you out to lunch sometime next week instead."

"It's a pretty good excuse," Bonnie said. "You know, come to Bonnie's birthday drinks or be ready when they need you to save lives."

"Since Jasmine couldn't come," Matt said, smiling at Meredith and Stefan, "you can tell me what happened with Celine. She's dead?"

That was the one problem with Jasmine, Bonnie thought, taking a swig of her drink. She'd been dating Matt for a couple of years, and everyone really liked her, but she didn't know the truth about him, about all of them. Jasmine knew Bonnie liked fortune-telling, herbs, and "New Agey" stuff, but she didn't know she was really a *witch*. She knew Alaric had a doctorate in paranormal studies and folklore, but she didn't know any of *that* was real either; she just thought he was an academic. And she sure didn't know the truth about Stefan, or Zander and his friends, or Elena. She didn't even know Matt, not really, how he'd fought evil again and again, how strong and brave he was. She just thought he was a nice, ordinary guy.

Maybe Bonnie needed to slow down on the champagne cocktails, because she opened her mouth and heard herself say, loudly, "Matt. How can you love Jasmine, when she doesn't even know who you are?"

Matt's face stiffened, his mouth forming a tight line, and a hot flush of embarrassment ran over Bonnie. Wasn't she *ever* going to learn to keep her mouth shut? After a moment, Matt said stiffly, "It's safer for her this way." His light blue gaze met hers. "I just want Jasmine to have a normal life."

Bonnie's throat tightened. She remembered when she and Zander had finally told each other the truth about themselves, more than five years ago. How she'd held his hand, nervous. *Normal is overrated*, she'd told him, and they'd kissed, sweetly and honestly, everything open between them. She couldn't imagine keeping secrets from someone she loved for so long.

She managed to smile at Matt, although the smile felt pinched on her face, and nodded, blinking away the stinging in her eyes. "Okay," she said in a small voice.

There were an awkward few moments of silence.

"Anyway," Meredith said, with a brittle little laugh. "Since you asked ..." She began to describe to Matt the battle she and Stefan had fought with Celine.

It was a dramatic story. There were secret passages and close calls and much use of Meredith's skills and Stefan's vampire speed and strength before they'd even gotten close to Celine. But finally they'd tracked her down in Atlanta, evaded her vampire soldiers, and killed her with Elena's magic blood.

The first two times they'd told the story tonight, Bonnie had been hanging on Meredith and Stefan's every word.

This time, though, she politely stifled a yawn and glanced around. Everyone else was still riveted. Even Alaric, who was usually Bonnie's compatriot in being more interested in the magical side of fighting monsters than the physical side, was asking intelligent questions about weaponry.

She sighed, dutifully fixing her eyes back on Meredith. It was possible, Bonnie admitted to herself, that she was a little bit jealous. They hadn't asked her for help at all in tracking down Celine.

Bonnie was good at fighting evil. It was just that, as her friends had become even more superpowered—faster, stronger, in Elena's case *immortal*—it was possible that they didn't really *need* her.

Bonnie pushed the feeling away and took another sip of her drink. *Stop being ridiculous*, she told herself firmly.

Meredith was reaching the end of her story—Stefan was about to cut Celine's head off, as the Old One writhed in her death spasms—when Zander caught Bonnie's eye and suddenly hopped to his feet, knocking his tiny gilt chair over with a clatter.

"Whoops," he said, winking at Bonnie as he sauntered closer. She grinned back at him. Maybe she hadn't been doing as good a job of hiding her

emotions as she'd thought. "Time to toast the birthday girl," he announced, and everyone climbed to their feet.

"Okay," Zander said thoughtfully. "I'll go first. What is there to say about Bonnie McCullough that you don't all know already?" He pulled her closer, wrapping a warm, strong arm around her shoulder, and she leaned happily into him. "Well, there was the first night we moved into our apartment. It felt weird being in this brand-new place, and I couldn't sleep. But then Bonnie started telling me all about these myths she'd been reading about selkies. She was so smart and looked so gorgeous with the moonlight shining on her, that I would have fallen in love with her right then and there if I wasn't already fully and completely in love. And I thought, as I fell asleep, *Moving in with Bonnie is the best decision I ever made.*" He kissed her briefly, the corners of his sea-blue eyes crinkling affectionately, and raised his glass. "Which of course I already knew. To Bonnie!"

They all drank, and then Meredith cleared her throat. "I couldn't have gotten through the wedding without Bonnie," she said. Her olive cheeks flushed slightly as she added, "You all know what my parents are like. When I couldn't stand them taking over the wedding planning anymore, Bonnie and Elena would kidnap me and take me somewhere on a 'sanity outing.' The very best sanity outing was Bonnie's idea."

Elena started to laugh. "This was *completely* Bonnie's idea."

"They took me to the batting cages down at the park," Meredith went on, "and slapped a batting helmet on me and turned on the machine, and I whammed balls around until I didn't feel like running off to Vegas to elope anymore. And Bonnie sat there and shouted advice at me and bought me a hot dog when I was done." She slung an arm around Bonnie and hugged her tightly, pressing a cool cheek to hers. "Best friends ever."

"Me next," Elena said, as Meredith let go of Bonnie. "So, as you'll recall, Bonnie and Meredith and I spent all four years of college rooming together. When we graduated last summer, it was"—she shrugged—"scary. We weren't going to be there for each other every minute anymore. That last night, Bonnie decided we were going to have a slumber party just like the ones we had in junior high. We did one another's hair and nails and prank-called our boyfriends—"

"I was very surprised," Alaric added solemnly.

"It was a silly night," Elena said, "and it took Meredith and me a little while to get into the spirit of it, but Bonnie coaxed us along, and it ended up being perfect. Sisterhood." As Elena raised her glass, Bonnie suddenly remembered how Elena had looked that night, her usually perfect hair in a

hundred sloppy braids, laughing in pink pajamas. Elena, she thought, needed to laugh more.

“Velociraptor sisterhood,” she corrected, and Elena smiled at their old private joke.

Matt stepped forward a little. “My favorite memory of Bonnie this year is from Alaric and Meredith’s wedding,” he said. “Jasmine was still feeling awkward around you guys—she knew we’d been friends for a long time, and I guess it’s weird for new people—”

“It *is*,” Zander agreed loudly. “And Jasmine and I are both *awesome*.”

Bonnie shushed him. “We’re talking about me now, honey.”

“Anyway,” Matt went on. “At the reception, Bonnie took Jasmine under her wing, and before I knew it she was out dancing with all the girls and having a great time.”

“Her dance moves put me to shame,” Bonnie told him. Jasmine had looked gorgeous that night, her short teal dress setting off her long dark curls and caramel-colored skin. Most beautiful of all, though, had been the way her eyes shone every time she looked at Matt. Matt *deserved* someone who saw how great he was, Bonnie thought, and so she’d tried really hard to make Jasmine comfortable.

When Matt fell in love, he fell hard and for the long haul, and he hadn’t had much luck in the past. Even if he wouldn’t tell Jasmine the whole truth about himself, Bonnie wanted them to work out, for his sake.

Stefan raised his glass. “Bonnie, when I first met you, you seemed so sweet and innocent and *young*. I didn’t take you as seriously as I should have. But it wasn’t long before I came to realize how wrong that was. You are spontaneous and intuitive and have a warm, loving heart. Here’s to your twenty-fourth year being even better than the last.”

All Bonnie’s friends were smiling at her, their glasses held up to toast, and she smiled back, warmed by the combined affection of their gazes. It was fine. Even if she wasn’t *essential* to the monster fighting, she knew everyone loved her.

Today, Bonnie was happy.



“You’re being very boring, you know,” Katherine called up to Damon from the piazza. “Come join us.” Damon languidly waved at her from the balcony without looking up from the screen of his laptop. The sun had just set, but some light still lingered; dark shadows spread across the floor.

Something awful is going to happen, he read. I need you to be safe. He closed the laptop without replying to Elena’s message and leaned back in his chair, frowning a little.

Then he felt for his connection with Elena—tentatively, as if he were lowering himself slowly into a deep, swirling river. The bond between them was always there, but Damon had gotten better at keeping it in the background, a mere comforting hum reminding him *Elena’s there. Elena’s there, and she’s fine.*

But now he let his barriers fall. The sense of *ELENAELENAELENA* hit him like a tidal wave, and Damon went under for a minute, his senses flooded by Elena’s emotions, Elena’s essence. He could almost smell her: her pomegranate body wash, the faint coconut scent of her shampoo, and underneath it all the warm, tantalizing smell of Elena’s rich blood. He caught a flash of quick images from her: the red of Bonnie’s hair, something shiny glittering at the edge of Elena’s vision. She was content right now, he realized, enjoying herself, and that told him all he needed to know. She was fine, and his brother, Stefan, was safe. Whatever new disaster was hovering at the edges of Elena’s life, and of Damon’s own, it had not yet arrived.

Maybe it never would. There would always be danger; Damon had accepted that centuries ago. And threats rarely came when you were expecting them. Even a Guardian like Elena could be wrong.

He stood up and stretched with a liquid grace, pushing his connection with Elena back to the edge of his consciousness. Sometimes, in the very

early morning when he was settling to rest, Damon would open himself all the way to Elena just to feel her with him, the sense of her flooding through him as he lay back on his silken sheets. Usually she was sleeping then, deep in the dark of a Virginia night, and Damon could lose himself in Elena's dreams.

But touching Elena's mind like that always left a strange ache in Damon's chest afterward, so he tried to resist as long as he could. He didn't quite know what the sensation was. It couldn't be loneliness, because Damon was never lonely.

He wandered to the edge of the balcony and looked down into the piazza below. There were a few tables set around the grand fountain in the middle of the square, but only one was occupied. Katherine was not in the mood to mix with the locals, and so the locals had found themselves deciding to stay inside tonight.

Katherine looked up at him, her long golden hair falling over the back of her chair, and beckoned imperiously. Beside her, her current boyfriend, Roberto, glanced at Damon and then down at the table. "Come here," she said. "It's time for dinner."

Sometimes Damon couldn't believe he was still traveling with Katherine. He had never expected to see her again. But then, two years ago while wandering the streets of Tokyo, he'd caught sight of her through the crowd, felt the familiar brush of her mind, and she'd turned and smiled at him. He hadn't mistaken her for Elena—he never did, although they looked so much alike. And somehow, even after everything they'd been through, it had felt like the most natural thing in the world to cut through the crowd and take her hand. After all, he'd spent most of his long life loving her.

They'd been traveling together since then. And this much could be said for Katherine: She was infuriating at times, selfish and conceited, but she was never, ever dull.

More quickly than a human eye could have followed, Damon gracefully dropped from the balcony to the piazza below, his feet landing cat-soft on its cobblestones. Katherine smiled at him and patted the seat of the chair next to her.

"I'm starving," Roberto said sulkily, as Damon sat. "Where's the waitress?"

Roberto was always complaining, always on edge. Damon remembered what it was like to be a young vampire, restless and unable to settle, but surely he had never been as petulant as Katherine's latest toy. At least, Damon consoled himself, Roberto wouldn't be with them for long.

He wasn't the first handsome young man Katherine had picked up in their travels. There'd been Hiro in Tokyo and Sven in Stockholm, Nigel in London—Damon had actually liked Nigel, who'd at least had a sense of humor—and Jean-Paul in Paris. Roberto, with his dark hair and cleanly cut features, was just the latest. After a while, Katherine always left them behind.

But for now, she was still enjoying her new toy, and so Damon would tolerate him. Katherine patted Roberto on the arm soothingly. "Look," she said. "Here she comes." A pretty girl from the restaurant at one side of the piazza was hurrying toward their table, carrying a tray piled high with food and drink.

Damon smiled briefly at the girl as she placed a platter of figs and prosciutto before him. Picking up one of the ripe, firm fruits wrapped in salty meat, he bit into it and licked his lips. He didn't have to eat human food, of course, but sometimes he enjoyed the novelty of it.

"Bianca, come here," Katherine said to the waitress.

The waitress came and stood beside Katherine's chair, her face half-eager and half-shy. "*Si, signora?*" she said breathlessly, "You want—you want something from me?"

"Yes." Katherine stood and cupped the girl's face gently, gazing into her eyes. Damon felt a whisper of her Power. "You remember what I want," she said softly, soothingly. "It's all right with you. In fact, you'll enjoy it. Afterward, you won't remember anything about this until I tell you to. You'll just know that you want to do whatever makes us happy."

"Of course, yes." The girl nodded enthusiastically, her long chestnut hair falling across her face, brushing over Katherine's hand. "Whatever you want." She held out a hand to Roberto and he took it, cradling it against him as he bit deeply into her wrist and began to drink from the vein there.

Katherine turned Bianca's face toward Damon, both girls gazing at him with wide, untroubled eyes. "Do you want some?" Katherine asked. "I'm the one who's compelled her, so it won't violate your precious agreement with the Guardians."

Damon flinched involuntarily, then covered his reaction with a smile. Taking a sip from his bubbling glass of prosecco, he shook his head. "I don't want her," he said coolly, and watched, his face carefully blank and bored, as Katherine angled the girl's head and sank her fangs smoothly into Bianca's neck while Roberto continued to suck steadily at her wrist.

He could, technically, have drunk from the girl. Katherine was right: His deal with the Guardians was that *Damon* could not compel people to let him

feed on them, not without hurting Elena. He could have spent eternity following Katherine, or any other vampire, around the world, feeding on humans they'd compelled for him, like a parasite. But the very notion disgusted him. He was Damon Salvatore, and he was no one's parasite.

Besides, he was doing just fine on his own.

Damon looked up to see Vittoria coming toward him, skirting around the fountain, where the dancing water reflected the lights of the piazza and made soft shadows across her skin. She was young, a university student, and still lived with her parents; she would have had to lie to them about where she was going. Her dark curls were knotted in a loose bun at the nape of her neck, and she held herself very straight, walking with the grace of a dancer. He got to his feet to meet her.

Vittoria glanced at Katherine and Roberto, drinking steadily from Bianca, then walked around them gingerly, averting her gaze. She stopped to stand before Damon.

"It doesn't hurt her," he said. "She'll be all right; she won't even remember."

"I know," Vittoria said solemnly, her eyes wide and disconcertingly trusting. Damon held out his hand, and Vittoria took it. Hand in hand, they crossed the piazza and sat on the edge of the fountain together.

"Are you sure about this?" Damon said, tracing the shape of Vittoria's fingers with his own. "I don't love you; you know that."

"I—I don't mind," Vittoria said, her cheeks flushing. "What you do to me. I like it," she added in a hushed, half-embarrassed voice.

"As long as you're sure," he told her, and she nodded, swallowing hard. Damon stroked a stray strand of hair back behind Vittoria's ear and pulled her closer. His sensitive canines extended and sharpened, and, as gently as he knew how, Damon slid them into the vein at the side of Vittoria's neck.

She stiffened in pain and then relaxed against him, her blood bursting into his mouth like the juice of a ripe plum. It wasn't as rich as Elena's, but it was sweet, filling Damon's mind with the images of young, soft-featured girls from his distant past, looking up at him with love and desire.

He remembered how nervous he'd been when he'd left Elena, how worried that, if he couldn't compel humans to let him feed, he would go hungry, or be reduced to stalking squirrels and foxes like his little brother. But it had turned out to be surprisingly easy.

He couldn't use his Power to compel human girls, but he could *charm*

them. He could talk to them, flirt with them, smile into their eyes just as he had in Florence five hundred years ago, back when he was human and angling for nothing more than a kiss or two. It surprised him, how easily it came back to him. And he liked the girls he charmed, even loved each of them a little in his own way. Though he forgot them as soon as he and Katherine moved on.

It was very late by the time he'd finished and released Vittoria. She brushed a shy kiss against his lips and hurried away with a murmured good-bye, twisting a silk scarf around her neck to hide the mark of his bite.

Damon leaned back on his elbows and looked up at the stars. He felt someone sit down beside him, and shifted over to make room for Katherine.

"It's a nice night," she said, and Damon nodded.

"Clear, too." He pointed. "Polaris, the North Star," he said. "Leda, the Swan. They don't change, any more than we do."

Katherine laughed, a high, silvery sound like the ringing of a bell. "Oh, we change," she said. "Just look at us."

It was true, Damon thought, smiling despite himself at the challenge in her eyes. He'd known quite a few Katherines: the shy, clinging girl he'd met back home when he was human and she was newly made; the madwoman who'd pursued him to Fell's Church; and then this harder, brighter Katherine who had become, strangely, a friend. And he wasn't the angry young vampire who had woken on a cold stone slab beside his brother all those centuries ago, not anymore.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted.

"Of course I'm right. Now, I'm thinking we should stay here for a while," Katherine said. "Roberto says the palazzo's owner wants to sell. We could settle in."

Damon sighed. "Everyone here knows who we are already," he said. "You feed on anyone who catches your fancy. It'll all end in pitchforks and torches, like a horror movie."

Katherine laughed again and patted his knee. "Nonsense," she said firmly. "They love us here. We haven't killed anyone at all, thanks to your newfound morals. To them, we're just the beautiful rich people in the palazzo who sleep all day."

Damon looked back up at the stars. Katherine was probably right; they were in no danger. He imagined staying here for a few years: eating figs, tossing coins in the fountain, drinking from sweet Vittoria and eventually her replacement.

But sooner or later, they would leave and continue their wanderings across the globe: Beijing next, maybe, or Sydney. He'd never been to Australia. He would charm another girl into loving him, taste the richness of her blood, be irritated by Katherine's latest toy, gaze up at the stars. They were all the same after a while, Damon thought, all the places of the world.

"It doesn't matter," he said finally, closing his eyes and reaching again for the faint thrum of *Elena* inside him. "Whatever you want."



“Bonnie liked her present, don’t you think?” Meredith asked, straightening the pillows on the couch. She cast her eye over the rest of the living room: her law books lined up neatly; the coffee table dusted and cleared of Alaric’s research; the carpet vacuumed. She’d been gone for three days tracking Celine with Stefan, and she’d had some tidying to do when she returned. Alaric wasn’t a slob, but he didn’t keep things exactly the way Meredith did.

As she walked over to twitch the curtains straight, she caught Alaric’s eye. He was leaning against the doorframe and looking amused, a mug in one hand.

“You knew I was compulsive when you married me,” she said, and Alaric’s face split into a grin.

“I did,” he said, “and I married you anyway. But yeah, I think Bonnie loved the earrings.” He crossed the room and laid his free hand on Meredith’s arm, nudging her gently toward the couch. “Sit down and drink your tea. And then let’s go to bed, it’s late.” She let him pull her onto the couch with him and leaned against him, nestling in Alaric’s warmth. He smelled good, clean and soapy with an underlying Alaric-y whiff of spice.

“I’m glad to be home,” she told him, and snuggled closer still. She was getting sleepy. “I’d better study some before I come to bed, though,” she added dutifully. “Mock trial Monday. We’re all really stressed out.” The mock trials competition was a big deal, and she was the prosecuting attorney for her team.

Meredith adored law school. It was a culmination of all her love of logic and study, rules and case histories and solvable problems lining up in neat rows for her to master.

Kicking off her shoes, she curled her feet under her and sipped her tea, grimacing at the bitter, acidic taste of vervain. The mix of herbs Bonnie

concocted for her friends was heavy on the vervain—which protected the drinker from being compelled—but the first taste was always unpleasant.

“More honey?” Alaric asked, but Meredith shook her head.

“I want to taste all of it,” she said, and tried another sip, concentrating. The second time, it wasn’t quite so bad. Underneath the bitterness of the vervain was the faint sweetness of lavender and a rich touch of cinnamon.

“I don’t know why you won’t just sweeten it up,” Alaric said, shifting so that he could dig his thumbs into her vertebrae, kneading her shoulders with his fingers. “That’s nasty stuff.”

“I want to taste it all,” Meredith repeated sleepily. It had been a long day, several long days, and she was ready to spoon up against Alaric in their wide, soft bed and go to sleep. *Work*, she reminded herself. *You’re going to win this trial.*

Alaric worked a knot out of her shoulders, and Meredith moaned in pleasure. “You have no idea how tight my back got while we were gone,” she told him.

“Oh, Stefan doesn’t do this?” Alaric said teasingly. “Thank God, I was wondering what I had to offer that your hunting partner couldn’t.”

“Trust me, you’ve got lots to offer,” Meredith said with a smile. Alaric brushed her hair aside and focused on the massage while she looked happily around the room. Her law books sat on the shelf, her slim silver computer on the desk next to a stack of Alaric’s old manuscripts. Her hunting stave, in its case, was tucked in the corner. On the side table were various pictures of their friends, their wedding.

And a picture of Meredith, ten years younger, her arms around her twin brother, Cristian, both of them grinning. She didn’t really remember Cristian—this reality where they’d grown up together was one the Guardians had created—and she didn’t like to think about his death. Becoming a vampire was one of the worst fates she could imagine for a hunter.

Half-consciously, she leaned back against Alaric’s hands, and he kneaded her muscles harder, comforting. Lately, she’d been coming to terms with the idea of Cristian. He’d grown up part of her family, in this life, and he mattered, whether Meredith remembered the young boy in the picture or not.

All the elements that made up her life—hunting, school, becoming a lawyer, her friends, her family, Alaric—they all mattered. She’d been so used to thinking of hunting as what defined her—that everything else was a gloss over her secret life, part of her disguise. That all she truly was, was a hunter.

But Meredith was going to be a *lawyer* now. She was somebody's *wife*. She was a friend and a daughter, and once she'd been a sister. These things were real to her, and they all mattered. Just like Bonnie's vervain tea, the bitter and sweet and spicy all mixing together, making up a whole.

"I want to taste it all," she murmured a third time, sleepily, and Alaric snorted with laughter.

"You're just about talking in your sleep," he said. "Time for bed. Everything will still be there in the morning." He swung her up into his arms, and she buried her face in the crook of his neck, giggling sleepily, as he carried her to bed.



It was a beautiful night. Stefan opened his senses to everything around him, unusually eager to drink it all in. He could smell magnolia flowers in the yard of a house a few blocks away, the spices and grease of three different restaurants on the street he and Elena were walking up, the sour scent of beer coming from a bar halfway down the street, the warring perfumes of three girls getting out of a car near the curb. He could hear a hundred conversations, from the drunken argument of four frat boys in the bar to the loving whispers of a newly engaged couple in the Indian restaurant. In the apartment over a storefront farther down the block, a sad song played on a cheap radio.

The world had so much in it. He could feel the slow beat of his own heart, slower than a human's, and for once, its pace didn't feel like a reproach. For once, despite everything, despite what he was, Stefan felt *alive*.

So much to hear, to smell, to see, to feel. And most of all, Elena. Her hand was soft and strong in his, and she smiled at him, radiating love like a vibrant, glowing sun. His mind brushed against hers, and he could feel her welcoming him home, the familiarity and warmth of her.

He stopped suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk and kissed her. All the sensations and impressions that had been flooding through him narrowed down into one thing: Elena's lips, soft against his. Elena's warm breath. He sent her thoughts of *love*, and of *forever*, and she sent them back to him.

When they broke apart, they clung to each other for a moment breathlessly. Then Elena smiled and pushed her hair back behind her ears. "You're happy to be home," she said.

Stefan took her hands in his. "Now that Celine is dead, there can't be too many Old Ones left," he said. "When we find them, we can kill them, and then we'll be able to do anything we want, go anywhere we want."

Elena frowned, her eyes puzzled. “We can do anything we want *now*, Stefan,” she said. “We don’t have to wait and be sure all the Old Ones are dead. We can’t wait for that.”

Twining his fingers with Elena’s, Stefan smiled down into her eyes. “Remember how, when you drank the water from the Fountain of Eternal Youth and Life, you told me you finally knew what our future would look like?” he asked. “I’ve always known—I’ve known for so long that *you* were my future, that you were the only thing I needed.”

Elena’s eyes shone. “I know,” she said. “Stefan, I want that, too. I want forever.” Then her mouth lifted into a mischievous grin. “But we’ve got forever, don’t we?” She moved closer to him still, her soft hair brushing his cheek, her lips only millimeters from his, teasingly light. “I want to enjoy *right now*.”

Stefan was lowering his head to meet her lips once more when someone suddenly lurched against them. Elena’s breath puffed out in a soft huff of surprise, and she stumbled back a little, away from Stefan.

Immediately tense, Stefan felt himself fall into a fighting stance, his hands drawn up in fists. It took him a moment to realize there was nothing sinister here, no one he needed to defend Elena from. Just a group of people coming out of a bar, accidentally brushing against them. He shook off his aggression; he’d spent too long on the hunt lately.

“Sorry, sorry,” one of the guys said, holding up his hands apologetically. He smiled at them. “My fault. Are you okay?”

The stranger was tall, taller than Stefan, with sharp cheekbones, longish sand-colored hair, and curiously yellowish-green eyes, glowing like a cat’s, or a coyote’s. He wasn’t a vampire, though, Stefan sensed with a quick brush of Power—just another human out for an evening with his friends. Elena murmured that everything was fine, no harm done.

“It was our fault,” Stefan said courteously, and moved aside. But the stranger didn’t walk on right away. He was looking at Elena. Their eyes caught for a moment, Elena’s face creasing into a tiny frown as her clear blue gaze met the stranger’s yellowish-green one—and then the moment was over. Stefan shook off the strange feeling their locked gazes had given him. Elena was beautiful; he should be used to people looking at her. With another murmured apology, the stranger moved on down the street, his friends reforming into a group around him.

Elena turned her attention back to Stefan, putting her arms around his neck and pulling him back down for another kiss. “Where were we?” she said,

laughing up at him. “Right here? Right now?”



“If your little pet is going to drag us all over the countryside, you’re taking me out for a drink later,” Damon told Katherine in an undertone, flashing a false, bright smile as he climbed the winding tower stairs.

“Oh, don’t be a grouch, Damon,” Katherine said sweetly. “You have to admit it’s lovely here.”

“I don’t have to admit anything,” Damon said, but he felt the edges of his mouth tugging up in a more honest smile.

For days, Roberto had been begging to explore the white medieval tower they could see from the windows of their palazzo, in the rolling green hills outside of town. Tonight, Katherine had finally agreed to take him, like an indulgent parent giving in to a petulant child. For lack of any better options, Damon had consented to come, too.

Roberto ran eagerly ahead of them; Damon could hear his feet clattering on the stairs above their heads. The top of the first stairway opened into a large square room with a worn wooden floor, empty except for a huge fireplace at one end, but by the time Damon and Katherine stepped inside, Roberto was already climbing the next set of stairs.

“*Avanti!*” He called back in Italian, urging them on.

“Modern Italian doesn’t sound right to me.” Damon sighed, a little wistfully. “Back in my homeland, and the children here speak garbled trash.”

“Things change,” Katherine said with a shrug. “Like we said last night, even we do. I was born in the Hapsburg Empire, and it doesn’t even *exist* anymore. You and I, we just adapt and keep going.” She slid him a sidelong look as they entered the next stairway, and her voice dripped with false sympathy. “Are you having a midlife crisis, Damon? Do you want me to hold your hand?”

Damon sneered halfheartedly at her. “As if I actually care about the decline of the Italian language,” he said. “It’s only that ... this was home once, and now it’s just another place.” What was curious, and a little alarming, he admitted to himself, was that the thought of *home* now brought to mind a small town in Virginia and the faces of a bunch of American children. Principally, of course, a face much like the one laughing back at him as Katherine sprang ahead up the stairway.

At the top of the tower, the starlit countryside stretched out before them. The surrounding area was full of vineyards, and the smell of growing grapes and warm earth rose up all around. The sun had set more than an hour ago, but the air was clear, and Damon could see the lights of the town in the valley below them. The moon was full and large, hanging low in the sky—a harvest moon.

“It’s so beautiful here. I love places like this.” Roberto took Katherine’s hand. “Was it like this, did you live somewhere like this, when you were alive?” His voice was full of longing, as if he was about to burst into an ode to Katherine and how he wished he could have known her always. Damon almost snorted when Katherine’s eyes softened in response. It looked like Katherine was still finding little Roberto charming, which meant the boy would be traveling with them for a while longer.

Katherine was just beginning to answer when Damon stiffened and held up a hand to quiet her. There had been something ... it came again. A small sound, the brush of a quick light step.

“Someone’s coming up the stairs,” he said.

Katherine cocked her head questioningly, and Roberto frowned, listening.

And then feet pounded on the stairs, all attempts at quietness abandoned. Alarmingly fast, before even Damon could move, a pack of people burst through the doorway and were upon them.

One caught Damon by the arm and threw him hard, so that he landed sprawling at the edge of the tower roof. He rolled quickly to his feet. *Not people, then.* Too fast, too strong. Something else.

The leader, a tall woman, bared her teeth, and Damon realized. *Vampires.* How had he not sensed them?

The tall vampire who’d led the charge held Katherine’s arms pinned behind her and was angling to bite at her throat. Damon leaped toward them, throwing the attacker back while Katherine turned to quickly tear out her throat. A gout of blood sprayed across the white stone of the tower. Damon recovered quickly, back on the offensive, but there were too many of them,

and they were already pressing closer, undeterred by the first vampire's death.

Instinctively, Damon and Katherine moved back to back, uniting against the threat, and Katherine pulled Roberto behind them, shielding the young vampire. Damon could feel her breath speeding up, and then she snarled, her hands bunching into claws. She was a good ally to have at his side.

There were so many of them, though, at least fifteen. Where had they come from, and what did they want?

Then several attacked Damon at once, snarling, coming from all three sides. The one in front of him, a dark-haired man, punched him in the face and moved back before he could respond, then punched and dodged again as the others worried him with teeth and nails from either direction. They were trying to get him away from Katherine and Roberto, Damon realized, trying to separate them so their opponents could use their greater numbers to overwhelm them.

Quick as a striking snake, Damon snapped the neck of one of the vampires attacking him from the side. He bared his teeth in a wild, joyous smile, then charged forward to grab hold of the dark-haired vampire in front of him, propelling him backward to the edge of the tower and sending him over in a flurry of flailing limbs. Not that the fall would kill him, but it would get him out of the picture, at least for now.

As Damon turned back from the edge of the tower, though, his heart sank. There were still far too many of them. And these weren't weak, newly made vampires either—they were strong and fast.

Katherine was holding her own, her face drawn into a snarl as she grappled with one of the attackers, ignoring another that was clawing ineffectively at her back.

But Roberto was in trouble, cornered on the far side of the tower.

Another vampire clutched at Damon before he could move toward the boy, and they tussled for a moment. His opponent swung him around, and Damon barely managed to dodge the stake a second vampire was aiming at his chest. Angry, he tore the stake from the second vampire's hand and stabbed it into the vampire's throat.

Shoving past them, he headed toward Roberto, who was struggling frantically, his face pale. The boy had probably never been in a fight before, not even when he was human, Damon thought in annoyance. But then Katherine screamed, and Damon turned to snap her attacker's neck.

"Katherine! Help!" A desperate gasp.

Katherine and Damon both looked toward the other side of the roof just in time to see Roberto's terrified face. A fierce-looking girl, younger even than Roberto when she was made, grabbed hold of his head as he fell and *pulled*. With a terrible ripping sound, Roberto's head was torn away from his body.

Katherine gave a strangled cry.

A few feet from them one of the wounded vampires struggled to her feet, her torn throat already healed.

"That's it; we're leaving," Damon said sharply. Taking a firm hold of Katherine's arm, he dragged her the few steps to the edge of the tower. Before any of the vampires following them could catch them, he leaped out into the darkness, taking Katherine with him.

They landed in a crackle of grape vines and the smell of dry earth. Catlike, Damon was on his feet in an instant. The vampire he'd thrown over earlier didn't seem to be anywhere around, he noted thankfully. He was probably already back up on top of the tower.

"What's going on?" Katherine asked, her voice harsh, her blue eyes narrowed with fury. "Why—who hates us? Who would want to kill us now? Klaus is dead. There's no one—"

"We don't have time for this," Damon said tightly, cutting her off. He could hear steps on the tower stairs. Their leap into the night had bought them a few minutes at best, and their attackers weren't going to give up so easily. "Come on," he said, taking Katherine's hand and pulling her roughly after him.

Damon and Katherine ran through the vineyards, plants crunching beneath their feet. They hadn't fed yet tonight and had used up too much Power in the fight to shift shape and fly, as Damon would have preferred. The most important thing was to get away.

At last, deep in the woods outside the little town where they'd been staying, they stopped to listen.

"I think we've lost them," Katherine said.

"For now." Damon frowned. "This wasn't a random attack. They must have been tracking us."

Katherine nodded. "Is there anything at the palazzo you can't stand to lose?" she asked.

Damon thought briefly of his favorite jacket, of a bracelet he had bought with the vague intention of sending it to Elena, of sweet Vittoria and her warm, fresh blood. "Nothing that can't be replaced." Hesitantly, he touched

Katherine's arm. "I am sorry about Roberto," he said.

Katherine's jaw tightened, and Damon thought he caught the shine of tears in her eyes, but her voice was level. "It happens," she said. "But he was awfully young. I would have liked to have taken him somewhere he'd never seen before."

Damon glanced up at the moon, which hung high in the sky overhead. It wasn't late yet; the trains would still be running. If they made it to the station, they could be across the border before dawn. "I think it's time we left Italy," Damon said softly.



Elena drove slowly down one of Dalcrest campus's side streets, looking for a parking place. There was an antiquarian bookstore around the corner, and she knew they had a collection of the medieval poetry Stefan liked. It would be nice to give him a little welcome-home present, she thought, smiling in anticipation.

Suddenly and without warning, her throat constricted and a bolt of panic shot through her. *Damon*. Somewhere, Damon was in trouble.

She involuntarily jerked the wheel aside and just managed to avoid sideswiping a parked car. His emotions ran through her, much stronger than usual, overwhelming her senses. Anger, and a sharp sense of fear, rage, a sort of adrenaline-fueled exhilaration. Was he fighting? What was going on? Panicked tears rose in her eyes—her own, she thought, not Damon's—and she blinked them back.

She needed to go home. She had to get to Stefan, let him know something was wrong. Taking a deep breath and trying to calm down, Elena took a sharp right and headed back toward the highway.

The road was clear ahead of her. Pushing Damon's emotions away, she risked fumbling in her purse for her phone. It was evening right now in Italy, where Damon had been the last time she had heard from him. But he could be anywhere, really. He traveled from country to country the way most people crossed streets.

Just as her hand closed around the phone, another flash of emotion from Damon broke through—fury, followed by a feeling of cold calculation. Whatever was happening to Damon, he was plotting a way to get through it. It made her feel a little better. If Damon was good at anything, it was surviving.

Elena quickly punched Damon's number into the phone, but it went straight to voice mail.

“It’s me,” she said to the electronic silence, the full distance between her and Damon stretching into infinity. “I felt something from you all of a sudden, something bad. Are you okay? Please call me.”

As she ended the call, she pushed down hard on the gas pedal, the tires squealing as the car jumped forward. Stefan would know what to do. Suddenly she was desperate to get home to him, to his comforting arms and his always-practical mind.

She pushed her foot down on the gas again, and this time, the pedal sank unresistingly to the floor of the car. Jerking, the car sped faster, much faster than Elena had expected.

Instinctively, she hit the brake, but nothing happened. Trees and telephone poles whipped past in a blur of green and brown.

Tightening her grip on the wheel until her hands ached, Elena slammed down on the brake again. The car didn’t slow, but the wheel began to vibrate in her hands, small tremors at first, becoming faster and faster. Her heart raced, and a tiny panicked whine came from Elena’s throat.

The car was beginning to drift across the highway, and another car swerved around her, honking loudly. She yanked on the wheel, trying to get back into her own lane, but it only spun uselessly under her hands.

“Come on, come on,” Elena whimpered, pleading with the car, or the universe. “Please, no.”

This is it, she thought with a blank feeling of wonder. After everything that had happened, after all she’d survived, she was going to die here, in an out-of-control car on a bright, sunny afternoon.

Something huge and dark rose up in front of her. *I’m sorry, Stefan*, she thought, and then everything went black.

* * *

“Elena? Elena?” A faint, unfamiliar voice was calling to her through the darkness. Elena twitched with irritation. She didn’t want to talk to anyone; she wanted to sleep. Her head hurt and her chest ached terribly. Was she sick?

“*Elena!*” A pounding noise, somebody banging near her head.

With a huge effort, Elena managed to drag open her eyes. Everything was blurry and white, too close, and she pushed at the whiteness, trying to shove it away. It shifted under her hands with a rustling of fabric, and slowly the world came back into focus.

The white stuff was an air bag, she realized, and it filled the space in front of her. *I must have hit something*, Elena thought dazedly, and raised her hand

to the pain in her head. Her fingers came away bright red, wet with blood. There was an aching, bruised feeling in her chest, and she scrabbled at her seat belt, smearing the blood across her shirt.

A wave of panic washed over her. She could have *died*.

“Elena!” the voice snapped at her again, and she jumped.

A guy a few years older than she was, with short dark hair and heavy brows, stood just outside her window, rattling her door handle. “Elena!” he said sharply. “Hurry! You have to get out of the car.”

The intensity in his voice had Elena reaching automatically for the door handle, but then she drew back her hand. “Who are you?” she said warily through the glass. “How do you know my name?”

“There’s no time to explain. Please just trust me. I’m on your side.” His hazel eyes were steady, pleading with her. “You *have* to get out of the car.”

Something in his voice made her hurry to unfasten her seat belt and open the car door. But before she could say anything, he locked onto her arm and dragged her down the side of the road, away from her car.

“What are you doing?” Elena exclaimed, trying to dig in her heels and pull away. “Let go of me!” It was broad daylight. “Help!” she screamed, her voice shrill in her own ears, but no help came. She glanced around wildly, but there were no other cars in sight. The guy’s hand was like an iron band around her wrist, yanking her on.

She was drawing her breath in to scream for help again—surely there must be *someone* within earshot—when her captor came to a halt and let go of her.

“Okay,” he said, resting his hands on his knees and taking in great gulps of air. “This ought to be far enough.”

“What the hell do you think—” Elena began hotly.

And that was when her car exploded.

It went up in a great orange ball of flame and an ear-crunching boom, just like in the movies. A heavy cloud of oily black smoke rose from the flames.

Elena’s body felt numb. Her stomach rolled with nausea as she blinked in shock at the dark smoke, the hungry flames.

She’d felt so safe as a Guardian. She didn’t have to worry about getting old, or getting sick, or dying at the hands of vampires, or demons, or werewolves, or any other kind of *supernatural* being. All she’d had to worry about, Elena had thought, were very *human* causes of death—a knife, a gun,

strangulation.

A car exploding in the street, with her inside.

Her mother had died in a car accident, even though she had been a Guardian, even though she'd been hundreds of years old at least, and Elena wondered why she had never really considered the same thing happening to her. She wrapped her arms around herself, unable to tear her gaze away from the burning car.

The dark-haired guy was standing next to her, watching the fire with a mildly intrigued expression, as if it were a TV show or science experiment. He was only about Elena's own height but had well-muscled arms and shoulders, like an athlete. "I'm Jack," he said, seeming to feel Elena's gaze on him. She automatically gathered her Power and used it to see his aura, which seemed warm and brown, sincere.

"That's not supposed to happen," she said, and flushed, because the words sounded stupid to her own ears. "I mean, I read an article about movie clichés, and a lot of it was about how cars almost never explode. Certainly not just from running into a tree." As she spoke, she felt her heart steady. If they could talk logically about the *why* and the *how*, maybe she wouldn't have to think about the *what*. The fact that she could have been gone forever, never see Stefan or Damon again.

"It was a telephone pole," Jack said drily, and then the corners of his mouth turned up in a sudden and unexpected smile. It changed his whole face. He looked friendly and open, and Elena knew her earlier instinct to trust him had been the right one.

She tried to take a step and stumbled, feeling suddenly sick. Jack hurried forward to steady her, concern etched on his face.

"We need to get you home," he said, his hand under her arm, supporting her. "And you're right. This doesn't just happen." They both turned to look back at the steadily burning car.

"I don't understand," she mumbled. She felt like she might laugh, or scream. Possibly she had a concussion, because nothing seemed to be making any sense.

Jack wiped his hand across his face in a quick, nervous gesture. "Elena," he said, "this was no accident."



“I should have been there to protect you,” Stefan said wretchedly, wrapping his arms around Elena and burying his face in her hair. “I’m so sorry.” While he had been relaxing in the apartment, Elena had almost *died*. And he wouldn’t have even known until the police came to their door.

The world swung dizzily, and he clutched at her for balance. The thought of Elena dying was like an endless fall into a dark void. Elena had never been safe, never would be, no matter how many Old Ones he killed.

“There’s nothing you could have done, Stefan,” Elena said calmly, steadying him. She glanced around the room at all of her worried friends. Her eyes landed on the stranger—Jack—who had gotten her out of the car after the crash and brought her home. “It all happened so fast.”

“Thank you for helping,” Stefan said to Jack. Jack nodded pleasantly from his seat on the couch. He seemed to be taking everything in, his dark eyes flicking over the whole group with interest—maybe too much interest. He hadn’t called the police, hadn’t taken Elena to the hospital; he had just brought her home. Jack was an outsider; what did he think was going on?

“The important thing is to make sure that Damon’s all right.” Elena let go of Stefan and sat down beside Jack on the couch, closing her eyes with a little frown. Stefan knew she was reaching for her bond with his brother. He did his best to push down the jealousy that threatened to break the surface. Elena loved him; *he* was the one she’d chosen. But it was hard to accept the fact that she and Damon shared something that he couldn’t really understand. “Whatever’s going on, it doesn’t feel like he’s in danger now,” Elena said after a moment.

Stefan breathed a sigh of relief, realizing belatedly that Jack must think they were crazy. But his gaze remained polite and attentive.

Meredith came back in from the kitchen with a washcloth, brushing past

Bonnie and Matt, and sat down between Jack and Elena to dab carefully at the blood on Elena's forehead. "It looks like the cut's all healed up," she said. "And your pupils are normal, so you're probably not concussed anymore."

"Score one for the amazing properties of vampire blood," Elena said, smiling up at Stefan.

Stefan flinched backward, feeling his eyes widen. Meredith frowned in surprise, and Bonnie looked up from the floor by the couch where she was going through a bag of herbs, her mouth open in surprise. Matt had been worrying silently in the side armchair nearby, but now he unclenched his jaw to protest, "Elena ..."

"It's okay," Elena said, tipping her head back to smile reassuringly up at Stefan. "Jack knows all about us. He was following me because he wants to talk to us."

A chill ran through Stefan—*all* about them?—and he felt his eyes narrow suspiciously. In a second, he was looming over Jack. Grabbing the front of his shirt, he yanked him to his feet. "You were *following* her?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Jack held up his hands. "Wait," he told Stefan, "I'm on your side. I helped Elena."

"I have to ask," Meredith said dryly, folding the washcloth and dropping it on the coffee table. "If you weren't the one who tampered with Elena's car, how did you know it was going to blow up?"

Jack chuckled and leaned back, pulling his shirt out of Stefan's hands. "I like you," he told Meredith. "I bet your dad's really proud of you."

Before Meredith could snap a reply—after all, Stefan thought, it was a patronizing thing to say—Jack raised his hands and crooked his pinkie fingers together, balling his other fingers into fists and bringing his thumbs together above them to make a triangle.

The sign meant nothing to Stefan, but Meredith gasped. "You're a hunter," she said, in a far less confrontational voice. "You know my father?"

Jack smiled. "Not personally, no. He doesn't have contact with hunters anymore; I guess you know that. But 'Nando Sulez is a legend. It's an honor to meet his daughter."

The hard line of Meredith's mouth softened in surprise, and Stefan backed off a little, still suspicious. "The fact that you're a vampire hunter hardly gives me a reason to trust you," he said. Elena reached a hand out to touch his leg, her thumb running comfortingly across his calf.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “I’ve looked at Jack’s aura. He’s good.”

Sighing, Stefan thought about all the ways that someone could be a good person and still want to kill vampires. Still, he had to trust Elena: Her instincts about people had always been sound, even before her Guardian Powers were awakened. “You haven’t answered the question,” he said to Jack, keeping his voice polite. “How did you know the car was going to explode?”

“My team—there are quite a few of us in town now—we know how powerful Elena’s blood is, that it’s the only real threat to the Old Ones.” Jack’s eyes flicked around the group. “When we realized that Solomon was headed for Dalcrest, we assumed he was coming to eliminate Elena. And when I saw Elena’s car crash, I felt sure that Solomon was involved. It seemed smartest for her to get away from the car.”

“Wait a second. Who is Solomon?” Bonnie asked. Elena’s white cat, Sammy, had stretched out on his back in her lap. Bonnie rubbed his belly without looking down at him, her fingers twining through his fur affectionately.

“Solomon’s an Old One,” Jack said heavily. “Maybe the last of the Old Ones.”

Stefan’s heart sank. Elena had been right; there was always danger. How naive of him to think that, just because they’d killed all the Old Ones they could track, there weren’t others tracking *them*. And this one must know about Elena’s secret weakness, if he had tried to kill her with a car accident. Elena was frowning worriedly, obviously having realized the same thing.

“I think I know a spell that’ll help protect your next car,” Bonnie said, her jaw stubbornly set. “I don’t know how well it’ll defend against deliberate attacks, though. I’ll do some research.”

Meredith took Elena’s hand. “Hey, we’ve killed Old Ones before,” she said reassuringly.

Stefan felt a surge of affection for Elena’s friends: stepping up immediately, ready to protect her.

Jack gave a short laugh. “You’ve never killed one like Solomon,” he said.

Stefan felt his fists clench. “You’re surprisingly well informed,” he snapped at the newcomer. “Who told you about Elena’s blood?”

“We keep our ears close to the ground,” Jack said. “When Old Ones started turning up dead and we figured out that blood had killed them, we were able to put that together with rumors about a new Guardian on the scene. Once we knew you existed, Elena, it wasn’t hard to find you.” Stefan, already

tense, felt his canine teeth sharpening. He turned his back to the others and breathed deeply, gripping tight to the chair beside him, and, slowly, his teeth slipped back to normal.

“What’s different about Solomon?” Elena was asking behind him. “Meredith is right—we’ve fought other Old Ones before. Klaus, Celine, Davos. They were all cunning and ruthless and terribly strong. They had to be, to survive as long as they did.” Elena’s voice was steady, but Stefan noticed the flash of panic in her deep blue eyes, the pink flush of her cheeks.

Jack leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “We’ve been tracking Solomon for years. I’ve never even *seen* him, just evidence that he’s been somewhere. Most of the Old Ones, they’re flashy. They *want* hunters to see how powerful they are, to show that they’re not afraid of us. Solomon, though, he keeps to himself.” Jack spread his fingers wide. “He can get anywhere, do what he wants, and, by the time we figure where he was, he’s long gone. He has more power than you can imagine, and he’s always a few steps ahead of us.” He paused. “We think Solomon won’t stop until he’s killed Elena.”

Stefan automatically moved closer to Elena. “He’s not the first one to try, and I’m still standing,” she said, looking pale but stubborn.

“I want to help protect you,” Jack said intently, his eyes locking with Elena’s. “It’s been my mission for so long to bring Solomon down. But I’ve never gotten close. I think if we band together”—he glanced at the others again—“we might have a shot at defeating him. Meredith, I know you haven’t known many hunters outside your family. You’ve done so much on your own, and with Stefan—but you could do even more with a team of hunters backing you up.”

“I had another hunter I worked with for a while. Samantha,” Meredith said. “But she died. Vampires killed her.” Her face seemed impassive, but Stefan had known Meredith long enough to notice the strain at the corners of her mouth when she thought of Samantha. There was a longing there, he knew. Like werewolves, hunters did best in a pack. Elena bumped her knee comfortingly against Meredith’s.

“These rumors,” Stefan asked, “how widespread are they? Even if we manage to kill Solomon, will there be other Old Ones coming after Elena? Should we be running instead of fighting?” He reached for Elena’s hand, his fingers tightening protectively over hers.

Elena shook her head, squeezing his hand in return. “We can’t run forever, Stefan,” she murmured.

Jack interrupted, his voice brisk. “Like I said, I think Solomon is the last. I’ve been hunting all my life, and there aren’t any other Old Ones I know of, not now that you”—he nodded to Stefan and Meredith—“have killed so many. So, are you with me?”

Matt, who’d been following the conversation in silence, gave a quick jerk of a nod. “Anything we can do against Solomon,” he said, like a pledge. “We have to stop him before it all begins again.”

“We can do this, Stefan,” Meredith said, her gray eyes shining. “We’ve already tracked down and killed *three* Old Ones. If Solomon’s coming to us, that just makes it more convenient.” She grinned. “We won’t have to travel.”

Rubbing the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, Stefan thought carefully. “If hunting Solomon gets too dangerous for Elena, she and I will leave town,” he told Jack. “Her safety is the most important thing.” Jack nodded solemnly.

“We’ll work as a team,” Stefan went on slowly, “like we always do. Bonnie and Alaric can use magic—Bonnie, maybe you can ask Mrs. Flowers what she knows about divination for evil creatures?” Bonnie nodded at the mention of her elderly mentor back in Fell’s Church. “Elena, keep your Guardian Powers on alert. If there’s an Old One near Dalcrest, there ought to be some signs of evil you can pick up on.” He let go of Elena and began to pace the room, his steps quickening as he thought. “Jack, we should get together with your team, figure out how we can best work together.”

He crossed to the closet and pulled out his hunter’s bag, trying to think what they would need. More vervain for Meredith’s weapons, to keep Solomon and any other vampires he might have with him from clouding the humans’ minds. Stakes of white ash. Iron.

He unzipped the bag, and for a moment his mind stopped, unable to process what he was seeing. There was a fine dust all over his weapons. Wood dust, he realized, soft under his hands except for a few small splinters. Something cut into his palm and he pulled it back quickly, wincing. It was a tiny shard of metal. There was an ache in his gums as his canines extended slowly, throbbing in time with his beating heart, and he realized that he was smelling blood. Elena’s blood.

“My stave,” he said, slowly. “It’s—it’s been destroyed.”

He could hear his friends exclaiming, getting to their feet, Sammy meowing in complaint as Bonnie unceremoniously dumped him off her lap. They were crowding behind him, all but Jack, who was standing a little away from the rest of the group. Elena touched Stefan’s arm gently. But his gaze

was riveted on the pulverized remains of his best weapon against the Old Ones. Nothing else had been touched.

“He came right in,” Stefan said, amazed. “Without being invited. All the safeguards and charms we have on this apartment, and somehow he knew where our only real weapon against him was hidden and came straight to it.” He finally dragged his gaze away from the remains of his stave, and his eyes met Jack’s. They were dark and full of what looked like pity.

“You see what I mean about Solomon,” the hunter said softly. “He broke through all your protective charms like they were tissue paper and disappeared without a trace. This is what we’re up against. This is what we have to fight.” His voice grew somber. “This was a warning.”

#TVD11WithoutaTrace



Matt was late meeting Jasmine. When he jogged around the corner, she was standing outside the little vintage movie theater, her arms wrapped around herself to ward off the chill of the late spring night.

A fierce, protective happiness lit up inside Matt at the sight of Jasmine. She glanced at her watch, clearly a little irritated—she didn’t get much time off from her residency at the hospital—but she wouldn’t be instinctively worried by Matt’s lateness. Jasmine didn’t automatically assume horrible things had happened. Because they never did, not to her.

Matt tried to shove aside the thoughts of Elena in danger, of Stefan’s face that afternoon as he had gazed down at the remains of his stave. Now he was here, with Jasmine, in the normal world.

“Hey,” he said, halting in front of her, panting a little. “I’m really sorry.”

Jasmine crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue at him. “Monster,” she said sweetly. “The only way you can make it up to me is by buying me a very large popcorn and getting lots of fake butter.”

As they waited in line at the concession stand, Matt wrapped his arms around Jasmine’s shoulders, and she reached up to twine the fingers of her hand with his. “So what held you up?” she asked. “It’s not like you to be late.” Her big brown eyes fixed on his expectantly.

Matt froze. He hadn’t thought about what to tell her. His silence was long enough that Jasmine’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“Elena was in a car accident,” he blurted, not lying, but not telling the whole truth.

Jasmine gasped, pressing her free hand against her mouth. “Oh my God,” she said. “Is she okay?”

“Oh, yeah, she’s fine, but she got a little banged up,” Matt said, and then

hurriedly corrected himself, remembering how Stefan's blood had healed Elena. Jasmine was a doctor; she would want to see Elena's injuries. "I mean, she's okay, but her car got pretty banged up. She hit a telephone pole."

They ordered popcorn and sodas and headed into the theater.

"That's terrifying. How did she manage to hit a telephone pole?" Jasmine asked as they settled into their seats, her hand still in his. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Wait, was she on the phone? I told her, driving while using a phone is just as dangerous as driving drunk."

"No, I don't think she was on the phone," Matt said, although he wasn't sure.

"Well, what happened, then?" Jasmine asked again. Matt could feel himself stiffening and rolled his neck to let go of the tension building up in him. It wasn't Jasmine's fault he didn't know what to tell her about Elena's accident; these were perfectly natural questions.

"Elena wasn't *drinking*, was she?" Jasmine asked him, her forehead crinkling.

"No! God!" Matt said. "There's nothing to tell. It was just a normal accident, and we're going to make sure it doesn't happen again." A woman in the row ahead turned to look at them, and Matt realized his voice had risen.

"What do you mean you're going to make sure it doesn't happen again?" Jasmine asked in a low, persistent voice.

For one crazy moment, Matt wondered if maybe he could tell Jasmine the truth. She wouldn't believe him at first—no one would. But he guessed she'd probably noticed things that didn't quite add up about them in the past. And she cared about all his friends. If he shared some of the worries that weighed him down, maybe Jasmine could help him bear them.

Something in him immediately recoiled from the idea. It was selfish of him to even consider it. Jasmine existed outside of all the violence and fear that had been Matt's life ever since high school, ever since the Salvatore brothers had first come to Fell's Church. She reminded Matt of the way he'd been before this all started.

Everything they had suffered—Elena's death, Klaus's attacks, hunting the Old Ones—had marked Matt and all his friends. Even Bonnie, the sweetest of them, had something hard-edged and fierce about her now. This new toughness had saved their lives more than once. But he didn't want Jasmine to have to change like that.

"I don't know," he told her. "I don't know why I said that. It was an

accident.”

Jasmine turned to look carefully into his face, then frowned, clearly aware that he was hiding something. She’d let go of his hand, Matt realized, and his fingers felt cold without hers.

Matt clenched his jaw, swallowing his urge to beg her forgiveness, tell her everything. But then he thought of what could happen. Chloe had *died* because of her involvement in the mess of vampires and werewolves, warriors and demons that Matt’s life had become. Even if Jasmine resented him for it, he would never tell her. He would keep her safe, no matter what.

* * *

“Duck!” Bonnie shouted wildly, scrunching down as far as she could in the passenger seat of the car.

“I can’t duck; I’m driving,” Zander said calmly. “Anyway, your parents aren’t going to see us.”

Bonnie sat up and turned in her seat to look back at her parents’ house. There was no car in the drive; they must be out. “I just feel guilty, coming to Fell’s Church and not letting them know,” she said.

“You’re on a very important mission,” Zander told her. “Anyway, we’re having dinner with them next week.”

“I know,” Bonnie said. “I just hope Mrs. Flowers has some ideas about how to search for Solomon. Elena’s Powers aren’t picking up anything.” The elderly, powerful witch had taught Bonnie a lot of what she knew.

“Hmm,” Zander responded, taking a left toward Mrs. Flowers’s house. Bonnie’s eyes drifted to his arm muscles flexing beneath his golden-tanned skin. Werewolves were naturally strong, of course, but ever since Zander and a couple of his Packmates had started a landscaping business after college, he’d only gotten buffier. She sighed appreciatively.

“There’s a car in Mrs. Flowers’s drive,” Zander said curiously as they pulled up. Bonnie blinked; there was a car, a shiny little blue Honda. That was strange. Mrs. Flowers was basically a recluse and, anyway, she had known Bonnie and Zander were coming.

“Maybe it’s somebody selling something?” Bonnie wondered aloud as they trailed through the untidy herb garden and up the path to the front door.

In the kitchen, they found Mrs. Flowers sipping tea with a girl about their own age. She didn’t *look* like she was selling anything: She was as tiny as Bonnie herself, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, with wild curly blond hair and a spattering of freckles across her cheeks.

“Hey!” the girl said as soon as she saw them. She put her teacup down a little too hard, sloshing tea into the saucer and onto the table. “Oops,” she added, grinning.

“Hello, children,” Mrs. Flowers said serenely. “Help yourself to some scones. Alysia, if you look behind you, you’ll see napkins to wipe up that spill.”

They settled at the table, Bonnie squirming impatiently as Mrs. Flowers poured two more cups of tea and handed around plates for scones and little sandwiches. She needed to talk to Mrs. Flowers about serious business, but Bonnie couldn’t see a way to bring up the subject of Old Ones in front of this stranger. And who was she, anyway?

From across the table, Alysia kept smiling at her. Bonnie shifted uncomfortably. Next to her, Zander bit happily into a scone. “These are amazing,” he told Mrs. Flowers, who smiled at him.

“Um,” Bonnie began, growing impatient, “Mrs. Flowers, did you manage to find anything on the ... problem I called you about?”

“There are some books of protection charms and divination spells on the table in the hall,” Mrs. Flowers said briskly. “You may take them with you when you leave. I’m afraid, though, that I don’t think the spells will do anything Elena can’t do on her own.” She put down her teacup and looked at Bonnie seriously, her blue eyes sharp. “I think Alysia might be able to assist you, though. She works with a group that could help you strengthen your Power.”

“What kind of a group?” Bonnie asked, confused.

Alysia straightened, her voice becoming formal, as if she was reciting a prepared speech. “It’s nice to meet you, Bonnie,” she began. “I represent an association of people who work together through the manipulation of natural forces to oppose negative elements. Mrs. Flowers is”—she shared a look with the older woman—“one of the chief contacts of our group, and she’s recommended that we invite you to join us.” The girl smiled eagerly, making her look even younger. “She had a lot of good things to say about you, Bonnie. You sound like one of the most talented recruits we’ve come across.”

“What do you mean, ‘recruits’?” Bonnie asked suspiciously. “What exactly are you recruiting me for?”

Alysia flushed pink to the tips of her ears. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have explained better. This is the first time I’ve coordinated a gathering. We’d like to invite you to our retreat for a few weeks, to share your abilities with others who have a deep connection to the natural elements, and they’ll share

their talents with you. If you find it useful, you can come back every year or two and work with the same team. We all help one another focus and hone our abilities. We're stronger when we work together."

"Like ... a workshop?" Bonnie asked.

"Sort of," Alysia agreed, dropping the formal tone. "We're really just a bunch of people who have magic powers and good intentions, and we think that if we work together we can get stronger, and counter some of the bad things in the world."

"Oh," Bonnie managed. She wasn't sure what to say. It sounded like a good idea, but did she really have time to join—what was this, a coven? "I've never really worked with anyone else. Except for Mrs. Flowers, of course."

"It'll just be for a few weeks. And I can guarantee it's a great way to take your abilities to the next level. Watch."

Alysia raised her hand and, her forehead wrinkling in concentration, made a complicated gesture, too quick for Bonnie to follow. There was a flash of red, and Bonnie heard birdsong as something fluttered past her, disappearing near Mrs. Flowers's china cabinet. Shadows of vines spread across the wall, and the scent of flowers and warm rain blossomed all around them. In the middle of Mrs. Flowers's kitchen, Alysia had conjured up a pocket of tropical rain forest.

"Wow," Bonnie said, as the illusion faded and the normal kitchen reassembled around them. "That was really neat."

"I'm good with illusions," Alysia said, shrugging. "But I never could have done that before I met the others."

"It sounds interesting," Bonnie said carefully. "Would you mind, though, if I checked something out for myself? No offense, Mrs. Flowers."

The older woman waved away the disclaimer. "I understand perfectly, my dear," she said.

"Don't be scared," Bonnie told Alysia, then turned to Zander. "Can you see if she's telling the truth?"

Zander got to his feet, accidentally jostling the table so that the delicate cups rattled, and took a deep breath. Then suddenly his body twisted, his face lengthening into a snout, his hands forming into claws. Alysia gave a startled yelp. In just a few seconds, a huge, beautiful white wolf stood beside them, gazing intently at Alysia with his sky-blue eyes.

"Oh, my God," Alysia said faintly, scooting her chair back from the table. Her face had paled so that the freckles stood out like little dark dots.

“Just stay still for a minute,” Bonnie said. “He won’t hurt you.”

Zander walked around the table to sniff at Alysia, his furred jaw almost pressing against hers.

“Is everything you’ve told me the truth?” Bonnie asked. Alysia nodded. “You have to answer out loud,” Bonnie added gently.

“Y-yes.” Alysia’s voice shook.

“Do you have any evil intent toward me?”

“No.”

Zander changed back—always, Bonnie thought, a less painful-looking process than turning into a wolf—and rolled his shoulders, stretching. “She’s good,” he told Bonnie.

Alysia had her hand pressed against her chest and was breathing hard. “Oh my God,” she gasped. “You control a werewolf?”

“What? No,” Bonnie said. “I don’t *control* him.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Zander said affably. “She totally owns me.”

“It sounds good,” Bonnie said, ignoring her boyfriend. “I’d like to be able to channel more Power.” She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she’d sort of plateaued—she was handy with herbs and charms, and could work a finding or protection spell pretty well, but her Power hadn’t grown much in the last few years. “When does it start?”

“Tomorrow,” Alysia said. “I know it’s short notice, but we had some trouble getting the whole group that we wanted together.”

“Tomorrow?” Bonnie shook her head, giving an incredulous little laugh. “I can’t. I have a job. And Elena’s in danger; I can’t leave her now.”

Mrs. Flowers’s lips thinned. “Your best chance of helping Elena is by expanding your Power. You need to give this serious consideration, Bonnie.”

“I don’t—tomorrow’s too soon,” Bonnie said.

“I think you should go,” Zander broke in unexpectedly. Bonnie turned to stare at him.

“You do?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean, obviously, I’d miss you like crazy, but this seems like something you need to do. You owe it to yourself to try. And the school year just ended, so you have time off work.”

Zander was right. Bonnie envisioned herself full of Power, protecting Elena, protecting everyone. In her imagination, she waved one hand and a shimmering, clear wall came down around her friends, separating them from danger.

She thought of how she'd felt the other day—that no one needed her, that she wasn't useful anymore in protecting Dalcrest from the supernatural. This was her chance.

“Okay,” she said, turning to Alysia, who clapped her hands and smiled. Mrs. Flowers nodded approvingly. “I’m in.”



“I can’t believe Bonnie just took off like that,” Elena said, swinging Stefan’s hand as they walked. They’d had lunch with Meredith, but then she had gone to the law library to do some studying—law school seemed to mean constant deadlines—and now they were heading back to their apartment alone. Zander had driven Bonnie to the airport that morning.

“She’ll be back,” Stefan said. Bonnie had left them with as many safety provisions as she could: charm bags for their cars and apartments, herb mixtures to drink or scatter for protection. She must have been up all night making them.

“I know. But I’ll still miss her.” Elena leaned against Stefan for a moment. “I just worry that someday ... I’ll lose her for good. And Aunt Judith told me the house is officially listed with the realtor now. She’s looking for a place in Richmond.”

“Bonnie will be back,” Stefan said reassuringly. “And your family won’t be far away.”

“I know,” Elena said, sighing. “But can you indulge my self-pity, please?”

“I’ll indulge.” Stefan tugged her closer as they reached the building. “Let me distract you for a while. Tell me what we’ll do once we get rid of Solomon.”

Hand in hand, they wandered through the double doors of their apartment building and started up the two flights of stairs.

“I’d like to go back to Paris,” Elena said dreamily. “I spent the summer there just before we met, did you know that?”

Stefan, putting his key in the door, was about to answer—of course he knew that, he remembered everything Elena had ever told him, everything he’d ever been told about her—when he stopped.

“Stefan, what’s wrong?” Elena asked, sounding worried, and he held up his hand to quiet her. He smelled blood.

“Stay here.” He heard Elena’s heart begin to pound faster, and he squeezed her hand reassuringly before letting go. “There’s blood in there. I need to check it out.” He carefully opened the front door and went inside. Everything looked normal, but the scent of blood grew stronger. Elena gave a faint, choked-off cry, and he knew that she could smell it now, too.

Gesturing at her to stay back, Stefan crept silently toward the kitchen, staying close to the wall. He sent tendrils of Power through the apartment, but found nothing—no one, human or otherwise, inside. But the smell of blood was overwhelming, hot and sticky and flooding through his senses. He felt his canines lengthening, beginning to ache, and his senses sharpened.

There were drops of blood scattered across the kitchen floor, leading toward the closed bedroom door.

Not just drops, he realized, as his heart sank. Paw prints.

Stefan swung open the bedroom door and the smells of blood, of *pain*, hit him like a physical blow. There was something small and pale on the bed. Blood was spattered across the comforter, leaving it soaking wet and dark red in places. The pale thing, Stefan realized, was Sammy. Their cat had been torn to pieces, his white fur matted with gore.

“Stefan?” Elena’s voice reached him from the kitchen.

“Wait—” he said, but it was too late. A soft, hurt cry burst from Elena as she stepped inside. She rushed to the bed, to the sad remains of her pet.

“Elena!” Stefan said. “Don’t look.”

But Elena shook her head and stretched out a hand, carefully touching Sammy’s head with one finger. The blood was dripping—Stefan could hear it falling off the comforter to pool on the floor. “Who would have done this?” Elena asked, tears running down her face. “He was just a harmless cat.”

“Elena,” Stefan whispered in warning, pulling her close to him. Something was very wrong.

With a loud crack, the windows began to frost over. The mirror turned silver with ice. Elena shuddered, and Stefan could see her breath coming in small clouds of vapor.

“What’s happening?” she whispered. Stefan just held tight to her. He wanted to protect her, but how could he when he didn’t know what they were facing? He turned toward the door, but that was freezing over, too, the lock encased in frost.

Everything was turning to ice, even the pool of blood on the floor hardening at the edges. As Stefan looked around helplessly, the ice over the windows and mirror gave a loud snap and split from top to bottom, the cracks forming a jagged S.

In the sudden stillness, Stefan and Elena stared at each other, shocked. Her face was pale, her lapis lazuli eyes wide with terror.

“Solomon,” she said, her voice shaking. “S is for Solomon. He’s been here again.”

#TVD11SolomonWasHere

* * *

The walls were dripping. Matt wiped the floor below the kitchen window with a dish towel, but the long trails of water from the melting ice had streaked the paint all the way down the wall. It was too big a mess to fix with a few minutes and a towel. After swiping at it a few times, he gave up and settled for taking a cup of tea out to Elena.

She was sitting on the sofa between Stefan and Meredith, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. “Thanks,” she said weakly when he handed her the cup. Matt had known Elena long enough to see that her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Poor little Sammy’s body had been tucked into a box by the front door; they would bury him tomorrow when it was light out.

Alaric and Zander came back in the front door of the apartment, the door banging behind them. They’d been patrolling the halls of Stefan and Elena’s building, checking to see if there were any other signs of Solomon’s invasion.

“Not a whiff of a scent,” Zander said, in response to the others’ anxious looks. “And no one I talked to had seen any strangers.”

Alaric carried a small brass triangle, from which hung a crystal on a chain. He tilted it from one side to the other, the crystal swinging, then shook his head. “There’s nothing paranormal resonating anywhere in the building, so far as I can tell,” he said. “Not even in here.”

“Jack said that Solomon could go anywhere without leaving a trace,” Meredith said.

“Are we sure it was him?” Matt asked, his gaze drawn to the sad box by the door. “I don’t understand how he’s getting in and out of the apartment. No one invited him.”

Elena drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, resting her pointed chin on top. “I don’t know,” she said. “But who else could it be? In some ways, it’s more frightening to think that we might have *two* enemies.”

“Or maybe,” Matt began, hesitant, “maybe he doesn’t need to be invited.”

They all fell silent as the implication sank in. If Solomon could come into their homes without an invitation, then the normal rules that governed vampires didn’t apply to him. Nowhere was safe.

There was a soft knock on the door. Zander answered it, his usually genial expression tense and wary. If he’d been in wolf form, Matt thought, the fur on his hackles would have been bristling.

“It’s Jack and his team,” Stefan told him, rising to greet them, and Zander stepped back to let them enter.

“Thanks for coming so quickly,” Stefan said, clasping Jack’s hand. He gestured back toward Matt and the others. “We haven’t found anything yet.”

Jack’s face was grim. “Meet my team. This is Roy, and Alex”—two tall dark-haired men who might have been brothers each raised a hand in greeting—“Darlene”—an Asian woman probably in her thirties smiled tightly at them—“and Trinity.” Trinity, younger than the others, had light brown shoulder-length hair and large blue eyes. She gave a dorky little wave when Jack introduced her.

They were all different physically, but Matt thought that he would have recognized them as hunters without being told. They shared a kind of competent grace, as if they were fully in control of what every part of their bodies was doing at any time. They all had those wary, alert eyes that took in everyone in the room.

“Give me all the details,” Jack said, looking at Meredith. She told him in just a few sentences about the slaughter of Elena’s cat and the ice that had cracked to reveal the letter S.

“Thank you, that was very clear,” Jack said approvingly. Meredith’s olive cheeks flushed slightly with pleasure, and Matt felt his eyebrows lifting. It wasn’t like cool, suspicious Meredith to care what a newcomer thought of her.

Then again, Meredith was a hunter by nature. Her parents had cut off contact with others of their kind when they stopped hunting themselves. Of course Meredith would be excited to finally meet more hunters.

“Are you sure it was Solomon?” Elena asked. “You said he wasn’t flashy like the other Old Ones, that he hardly left a trace. This was flashy, and took a lot of Power. And the blood ...” Her voice trailed off unhappily, and she twisted the edge of her shirt between her fingers.

The young brown-haired hunter named Trinity knelt down next to Elena. “I’m so sorry about your pet,” she said sympathetically, laying her hand on

Elena's arm and stilling her anxious movement. Trinity's eyes were warm with sympathy. Elena smiled weakly at her.

"It's definitely Solomon," Jack said. "You're right; he doesn't usually show off like this. As long as I've been tracking him, he's managed to be practically invisible."

"He doesn't even leave bodies behind," Darlene added. "People just disappear into thin air if he wants them to. He doesn't typically leave any evidence at all."

"So he *wanted* you to know he was here," Jack said. "He's sending you a clear message. He wants you to know he's after you."

"I have tracking Powers," Elena said. "Usually. But I haven't been able to find him."

"I wish Bonnie were here," Zander said. "Maybe she could do a spell that would show us something."

But Jack was shaking his head. "We've tried magic," he said. "Somehow Solomon's able to block it. It's like he's invisible and intangible to every sense we have, even the magical ones."

"How can we search for someone who's invisible?" Meredith snapped. Her hands had balled into fists, and she looked ready to leap up and start fighting.

"I wish I knew," Jack said, sighing.

"There's a funny smell in here," Zander said suddenly, cocking his head.

"Blood?" Matt asked. He could smell the coppery scent of blood throughout the apartment, and it was making him feel sick.

Zander shot him a wry look. "Something else," he said, prowling across the living room to the kitchen, sniffing. "Over here, maybe," he said, sticking his head through the kitchen doorway.

"I don't smell it," Stefan said, following him. He said it mildly, though: They all knew that Zander's sense of smell was stronger than anyone's, even Stefan's.

In the doorway between the kitchen and bedroom, Zander bent down and scraped his nails across the floor, then straightened and brushed something into his palm. "Huh," he said. Matt craned forward to see what looked like plain old dirt in Zander's hand.

"What is it?" he asked.

Zander looked up, then came back into the living room, his hand extended. "It smells like apples," he said.

"There's that apple orchard to the west of town," Matt said thoughtfully. "Have you guys been there lately?" Stefan and Elena shook their heads.

"Could it be a clue?" Zander said, looking hopeful.

Jack's eyes widened, then he grinned and slapped Zander on the back. "Maybe what we needed was a werewolf's nose," he said. "Looks like we're going apple-picking tomorrow."



Meredith flipped her pillow over to find its cooler side, lay down again, and squeezed her eyes shut. *Sleep*, she told herself firmly. She had so much to do tomorrow, so much to do every day. She couldn't afford not to be rested.

But when she closed her eyes, all she saw was the cat's little body, bloody and torn. It was a message, she knew: Solomon wanted them to know it could have been any of them. Would be one of them, all of them, soon.

They were determined to find him, but so far Jack was right. Solomon seemed to be invisible.

They'd gone to the apple orchard and searched the fields and woods around it, hoping that Solomon's hideout would be nearby. Nothing. A heavy ominous feeling hung over all of them like a dark cloud. He was coming, and it would be better to hunt him and fight him on their own terms rather than wait for his attack.

Meredith flipped her pillow again and turned over, looking for a more comfortable position. Alaric was snoring softly next to her, sleeping like a log. Closing her eyes again, she saw white on red: the white cat ripped apart on the blood-drenched bed.

Then the image morphed into her friend Samantha, torn apart by vampires back in college, blood sprayed across her bed, and Meredith took a quick breath, one that sounded more like a sob to her own ears. Then it was her brother, Cristian, his gray eyes half-open, Meredith's own stave through his heart.

Every night recently it had been like this, images of death keeping Meredith awake until exhaustion finally caught up with her. So much death.

Pushing the memories away, she tried to make herself relax, timing her

breathing to Alaric's: slow, long, steady breaths. She was so tired.

Time passed. After a while, she realized with a start that she was somewhere new. It was chilly, and a glaring white light hung above her, hurting her eyes. She tried to turn her face away.

She couldn't move.

Tensing her whole body, she took a deep breath and tried again. She still couldn't move. It felt like a tracery of thin wires was fitted over her body, holding her in place. Trying not to panic, Meredith strained against it, making an effort to lift one leg and then the other, her mouth dry with fear. Paralyzed.

Her heart thumped in her chest. She couldn't even turn her head. Meredith could hear herself panting, the sound harsh in the silence. Losing her careful control for a moment, she struggled frantically, the tendons in her neck going tight as she tried to thrash against the pillow. She wanted to hit out with her arms, kick, jump up and fight, or run away. But finally she stopped. She still couldn't move.

Calm down, she told herself sternly. *Figure out where you are.*

The light was blinding, making her eyes sting and water. But if she blinked away the tears, she could make out white walls, flat and sterile looking. A harsh antiseptic smell. Was she in a hospital?

Meredith was stretched out flat on some kind of bed or table, legs together, arms at her sides. There was something made of shiny silver metal just to the left of her head. She tried to examine it through the corner of her eyes. A sink maybe, or some kind of medical equipment.

Something moved at the edge of her field of vision, and she flinched backward. Whatever it was, she knew it wasn't good.

It was *watching* her.

Something in Meredith snapped, and she began to thrash again, straining ineffectively against the wires holding her immobilized. She tried to shut her eyes against the glare and found that they, too, were held open now. Her throat felt rough and raw, and a harsh, shrill sound went on and on, hurting her ears.

It was a while before she realized that she was the one screaming.

* * *

Meredith's eyes snapped open onto darkness. She gasped and panted, trying to calm her racing heart. She was in her own bed. *Just a dream.*

She'd kicked off the covers. Alaric was stirring and grumbling next to her.

“S’matter?” he asked groggily. “You all right?”

“Bad dream,” Meredith said, wiping roughly at her eyes. Hunters did *not* cry. “I couldn’t move,” she told him. “Something terrible was about to happen to me. I was ...” She paused to gather her thoughts, and Alaric wrapped an arm around her, pulling her closer.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, his breath warm against her cheek. “Just a dream.” He sighed, already falling back asleep. Meredith bit back more explanations of exactly how terrible the dream had been, how shaken and uncertain she still felt. Alaric was right; it was only a dream.

But she couldn’t shake the feeling of dread coursing through her. There was only one person who might know what it meant, who took dreams as seriously as she did. *I wish Bonnie were here*, she thought longingly.

* * *

I wish I were home, Bonnie thought longingly. This was nothing at all like she’d pictured.

She’d thought a witchy retreat would be all about getting in touch with nature. Hadn’t Alysia said that they would be channeling natural elements? Bonnie had pictured a bunch of earthy, hippie types, chanting and waving crystals in between learning about herbs and spells.

It wasn’t anything like that. Instead, Bonnie found herself in an elegant skyscraper apartment far above the streets of Chicago. Looking out the floor-to-ceiling stretch of windows beside her, she could see a steady stream of traffic below, the cars tiny and toylike. There were about twenty people scattered in groups around the big room, all beautifully dressed, glasses in hand. Near her, a sharp-featured blonde in an ice-blue cocktail dress tipped her head back and laughed shrilly. It was an expensive cocktail party in a big city, and Bonnie felt frumpy and out of place.

I am strong, she told herself. *I am magic*. But she could feel a prickle of tears at the back of her eyes. This room of strangers felt almost like the glamorous high society she’d mingled with in the Dark Dimension, a place Bonnie had tried to shut away in the back of her mind. These people could easily be vampires and demons. Why not? What proof did she have, after all, that they weren’t? There was no Lady Ulma here to dress Bonnie in finery so that she could outshine them all, and no Damon to save her if they trapped her. Bonnie shoved her fists deep into the pockets of her pants and hunched her shoulders.

The only thing that indicated this place might be more than just an expensive apartment was the mosaic floor, the small tiles underfoot making

up a design of intertwining plants, with dark green and rich gold and patches of bright color. *Chamomile*, she identified automatically, *good for strength and healing*. *Valerian*, *to guard against evil*. *Daisies for happiness*.

The pattern of leaves and vines and blossoms went all the way around the edges of the room. Further in were runes and other symbols. All the ones she could identify were positive, signs of healing and protection. The center of the mosaic was filled by a brilliant golden sun.

So, probably good witches, Bonnie thought hopefully. *Not vampires and demons*.

Her phone buzzed in her bag, and Bonnie automatically fished it out. There was a text from Zander: *Remember you've saved the world before. You rock. Have fun. I <3 u. xox*

So sweet, Bonnie thought. He was thinking of her, had known she might be feeling nervous. She pictured Zander's eyes, the warm blue of a Caribbean sea, looking at her with simple love. Zander *believed* in her. And she should, too.

Bonnie straightened her shoulders and dropped the phone back in her bag before striding confidently into the middle of the room. *I've saved the world before. I rock*.

Alysia came over to meet her. In a little black dress, her wild curls tamed in a loose bun, she was more pulled together than she'd been at Mrs. Flowers's. But her wide, freckly smile was the same.

"Bonnie!" she exclaimed, handing her a glass of wine. "Let me introduce you to the people you'll be working with over the next few weeks." She led her to a small group centered around a leather sofa. The floor beneath them, Bonnie noted, had the Nordic rune Fehu. The slanty *F* represented abundance, success, and energy. *I guess Mrs. Flowers making me memorize all those runes might come in handy after all*, she thought.

There were three other people in what was going to be her group. On the couch was a thin African American man a few years older than Bonnie whom Alysia introduced as Rick, and a gray-haired older woman named Marilise. Poppy, a tall, willowy girl whose designer clothes screamed "society diva" to Bonnie, hovered beside them.

After introducing them all, Alysia left to talk to another group, and an awkward silence stretched between them. Bonnie fiddled with the glass in her hand, putting it down on a tiny table at one end of the couch, then picking it up again.

“So,” Rick offered at last with a thin smile, “is this what you guys were expecting?”

Marilise shook her head. “I’m used to pulling energy out of the elements when I work,” she said. “I like to have my feet planted firmly on the ground and growing things all around me. I don’t know how I’m going to manage.”

Poppy was nodding eagerly. “I totally agree,” she said. “I talked to Alysia about it, asked her why they brought us all to the middle of Chicago. She said part of the challenge is connecting with natural elements anywhere, even in places that are the farthest from nature. It’s supposed to make us stronger,” she finished with an awkward little laugh.

They’re all just as nervous as I am, Bonnie realized, and that fact warmed her. She smiled at Poppy and the girl grinned back at her, tucking a tiny wisp of hair back into place.

“I’ve never really thought of the things I can do as connecting with the natural elements,” Bonnie said thoughtfully, “but nature’s all around us, isn’t it? Even here. We’ve got the sun and the wind, and the earth’s still *there*, under all that concrete.” They were all nodding, and Bonnie stood up straighter under their attention. “I use a lot of herbs,” she told them, “and those are a bit of the natural world you can take anywhere.”

Looking at their interested faces, Bonnie realized that here were people who wanted to learn what she had to teach them, who could probably teach her things she didn’t know. *Zander was right*, she thought. She smiled tentatively around at the group, and they smiled back at her. *Right now, this is where I need to be.*

“Is that a *gun*?” Elena asked, knowing it was a stupid question. They were at the apple orchard on the edge of town, on the roof of the building that housed the cider press, and Jack was loading a handgun with wooden bullets, quickly and competently. What Elena *meant* was, why do you have a gun?

“Sure,” Jack said easily. Catching Elena’s expression, he laughed. “Look, I know that bullets won’t stop a vampire, especially not an Old One. But wooden bullets might slow him down a little at a distance while we’re getting ready to fight.”

“Good idea,” Stefan said thoughtfully, resting a hand on Elena’s shoulder. “What else do you use?”

“Take a look,” Jack said, nodding toward a couple of large duffle bags in the corner. Meredith and Zander were already picking carefully through them, examining weapons, while Alaric watched from a few feet away.

“Is this a flamethrower?” Meredith asked, her gray eyes bright with excitement. “Awesome!”

The roof of the cider press building was shady and cool. “We haven’t seen a sign of Solomon,” Jack had told them when his team welcomed them up. “But we’re keeping an eye on things. This is a good place to train, too. Nothing overlooks us, plenty of room, and there aren’t many people here this time of year. Easy to avoid being seen.”

It should have been a peaceful place, the tiny green apples dangling from the trees’ branches, no sound but the rustling of the leaves. But shadows lurked beneath the trees, and Elena shuddered. What did this sun-dappled place have to do with an ancient vampire?

She watched, slightly wary, as Darlene handed Meredith something that looked like a weed sprayer attached to a couple of cylinders and Meredith shot a ball of flame across the roof.

“Careful there,” Darlene warned, but Meredith laughed.

“That’s such a good idea,” she said. “Take the fire right to the vampire. How did you manage to get that?”

“We’ve got connections,” Jack said with a wink. Then he sobered. “Seriously, though, there’s nothing more important than eliminating vampires. Vampires who are a threat to humanity, of course,” he added quickly, looking at Stefan.

“You want to see some of the fighting moves we’ve worked out?” Trinity offered eagerly. At Meredith’s nod, Trinity picked up a stave from the bag and took a tae kwon do stance, poised with one foot in front of the other, her weight carefully balanced. “Attack me,” she said, smiling broadly. “But not with the flamethrower, please.”

Meredith flashed her a smile in response, and slipped out her own stave. Before Trinity could brace herself, Meredith swept the stave at her legs, and Trinity had to leap to avoid the blow. A moment later, Roy, the shorter of the two brothers, joined in, swinging a heavy blade at Meredith’s arms.

“Practice sword; it’s blunt,” Jack muttered in an aside to Elena.

Stefan joined the fight, moving so quickly and gracefully that he seemed like a blur, using his superior strength to pull Trinity off balance as his teeth just grazed her throat. But then Alex, the other dark-haired brother, jumped in. The three hunters managed to separate Meredith and Stefan, blocking them whenever either got close to one of their opponents. Alex fell to one knee as Meredith swung her stave at his head, and Trinity immediately stepped on his back, launching herself into the air and knocking Meredith to the ground.

The three hunters were fighting smoothly as a unit, keeping Meredith and Stefan off balance. It reminded Elena of how the Pack fought, and she glanced at Zander. He was watching with a smile of simple enjoyment, his eyes sharp.

“Nice,” Meredith said, waving away the hand Trinity extended to her and climbing to her feet.

“We know you two fight well together,” Jack said, nodding to Stefan. “You could never have defeated Old Ones if you didn’t. But we hunters have our own techniques, based on centuries of experience fighting in groups. We can teach you, if you want.”

He and Darlene lined up across from Meredith and Stefan, beginning to demonstrate stances and holds. Trinity wandered over to Elena.

“Want to spar?” she offered, grinning easily and pushing her long brown

hair out of her eyes.

Elena felt herself flush. “Thanks,” she said, “but I’m not a fighter.”

“That’s not what *I* heard,” Trinity argued. “You’re a Principal, aren’t you? Come on. Want me to show you some moves?”

Elena reconsidered. Since she’d met Stefan, she’d found herself fighting against all kinds of enemies—supernatural and otherwise—and there was always the chance that one day her Guardian Powers and her friends wouldn’t be enough to save her in a battle. Maybe it *was* time she learned to defend herself better. Plus there was the edge of a challenge in Trinity’s cheerful gaze.

“You’re on,” Elena said. “How do we start?”

Trinity’s smile spread. “Okay, slide your feet shoulder-width apart, and balance your weight equally between them. Keep your arms loose with your fists just in front of your stomach.” She glanced down and nudged Elena’s feet a little closer together with her own sneakered foot. “Good,” she said. “Now, just react as I move at you.”

She punched straight at Elena’s chest, moving in half time, and Elena lifted her arm automatically to block the blow. “Good,” Trinity said again, shifting quickly to kick at Elena. She made contact this time, her foot gently hitting the side of Elena’s thigh.

Elena swung around and kicked back at her automatically. Trinity dodged out of the way, huffing a small surprised laugh. “Awesome,” she said. “Powerful and amazing, right? Try again, but this time, slide your right foot a bit forward and point your left foot to the side. That way, you can shift your weight back better when you kick and get more momentum going.”

Elena changed her foot position and was eyeing Trinity carefully, getting ready to kick again, when Zander stiffened and held up a hand for silence. “There’s someone coming. More than one person,” he said. “Apple smell’s stronger.”

Stefan heard them, too; Elena could tell. He and Zander stepped to either side of the roof entrance, ready.

“Come on,” Trinity whispered, as she and the other human hunters arranged themselves in a curving line to meet whatever came through the door. Elena and Alaric, the weakest fighters, dropped back behind the line. Alaric was muttering a quick charm, and Elena closed her eyes for a moment, searching for evil. She couldn’t activate her Guardian Powers without an immediate threat. At least, not yet.

But, try as she might, she couldn't sense anything unusual. Then the roof door burst open and three figures charged through.

They looked like a bunch of townie dads, Elena had time to think, but it didn't matter. She'd seen enough vampires to know they could have started out as anyone. Two had stakes, and one carried a machete, its blade gleaming wickedly.

The one with the machete swung it at Stefan, his teeth bared with rage, and Elena gasped in surprise as Stefan jerked back, blood streaming down his arm. Zander tackled Stefan's attacker from behind, low and fast, changing forms as he cannoned into the back of the guy's legs, and they fell in a tangle of fur and limbs. The machete clattered onto the rooftop beside them.

Stefan, his wound already closing, grabbed the next attacker by the arm and flung him in the air like a rag doll. The guy landed with a thud at the edge of the roof as Meredith stepped smoothly forward to strike him with her stave. At the edge of the roof, Jack drew his gun.

The third man, tall and blond, reached for the machete, swinging it up with an easy grip. Jack fired his gun, but the man kept coming, machete raised in one hand and a stake in the other.

"Wait!" Stefan called. "Stop!" He was staring in horror at the guy he had thrown across the roof, who was clambering to his feet slowly, blood streaming down his face from a head wound. The man with the machete snarled and charged toward Meredith, his shirt darkening with his own blood.

Stefan reached out and held him back, pinning his arms and forcing the man to drop the machete and the stake. Zander held his opponent by the back of the throat and shook him a little, growling.

"They're *humans*," Stefan said. "They've been Influenced; they're not responsible for what they're doing."

The blood-soaked guy charged, but Jack grabbed him and held his arms firmly behind his back, as he struggled and kicked. All three kept fighting without pause, wrenching away from their captors ceaselessly, even though they were clearly helpless against them. Elena could see now what Stefan had sensed with his Power: Their auras were curiously clouded, as if they weren't really aware of what was happening.

"What should we do?" Trinity asked, distressed.

"Let me try," Stefan said. He shifted so that he was holding the blond guy firmly still, face-to-face. The man snarled and tried to lunge at him, not flinching even when Stefan dug his fist into the bleeding bullet wound to stop

him. Elena saw Stefan's gaze flicker down to the wound and back again, the almost imperceptible flare of his nostrils as the scent of fresh blood hit him. Then he swallowed and focused, locking his eyes on the guy's.

"You don't want to do this," he said softly. "You want to stop and go home." He was trying to use his Power to break the Influence, Elena could tell, but it wasn't working. The man's aura grew grayer and more clouded as Stefan spoke, and he fought harder against him. Stefan tried using his Power on the others, one after the other, but it was no use.

"I can't break it," he admitted finally. "They've been Influenced by someone really Powerful."

Jack nodded. "Solomon. He's sending you a message. He knew we wouldn't kill the humans, and that they couldn't beat us. He wanted to show you how Powerful he is."

"I've got an idea," Zander said thoughtfully. Back in human form, he rubbed at his jaw as if it were sore, working it slowly. "I might be able to break the compulsion enough to get these guys to tell us the truth." He turned the bearded man with the head wound to face him, keeping a steady, gentle grip on him. Zander was so laid-back, Elena sometimes forgot how inhumanly strong he was. But now she couldn't help seeing how easily Zander controlled his captive, even though the guy fought and thrashed, his eyes stretching wide and his teeth bared.

Zander rested his chin on the guy's shoulder and wrapped his arms around him, pressing their chests together. Turning his head to face into his captive's neck, he breathed steadily and deeply. After a moment, Elena realized Zander was growling softly, deep in his throat.

At first, the guy fought harder, rearing away, but Zander only pulled him closer, blood from his face smearing across Zander's own cheek. The hair on Zander's arms was growing longer and thicker, Elena realized, turning to white fur again. His shoulders hunched and his jaw lengthened.

Zander wasn't changing fully this time, she saw, but he was somewhere between a wolf and a man now. Roy and Alex glanced anxiously at each other, but no one moved.

Finally, Zander's captive seemed to give up and grew still, his head hanging down against Zander's shoulder. His aura had calmed, Elena saw, its natural soft yellow color breaking through in patches.

Then Zander spoke, his voice half a growl, half human speech. "Why are you here?"

The guy was panting in time with Zander's breaths, and his answer seemed to be pulled out of him in gasps. "To kill the girl," he said. "Kill everyone with her. Don't give up."

"Who told you to do this?" Zander asked. The guy panted against him, not answering, and Zander's voice dropped an octave, the growling note increasing. "Who was it?"

The guy thrashed once more and then went limp, supported only by Zander's arms around him, holding him up. "Didn't know him," he panted. "Some guy. He was tall." He licked his lips. "Yellow eyes like a coyote. He wanted us to meet him on the hills north of campus two nights from now. Midnight under the full moon. Bring the girl's head, or we'll suffer."

Elena caught her breath and looked at the others. Jack's eyes were wide, a smile beginning to play around the edges of his mouth, and Trinity was biting her lip. Stefan had grown very still and thoughtful.

Zander relaxed, shifting the guy's weight, and his captive went limp against him. "I don't think he has anything else to tell us," he said. "He smells like apples, though. They all do. Probably they work here at the orchard."

It took Elena a moment to catch his meaning, but then it dawned on her. "If the scent came from them, the orchard might have nothing to do with Solomon," she said.

Alaric cocked an eyebrow. "At least if they were compelled to break into your apartment to destroy the stove and kill your cat, it probably means Solomon can't come in without an invitation."

Elena shrugged. That wasn't very comforting, not if Solomon could send people in after her, and not if his magic could infiltrate her apartment. She thought of the ice cracking across her windows, and shivered.

"Would sending humans work? Could they kill you?" Meredith asked, looking at Elena. "They're human, but they've been Influenced. Surely that wouldn't count as not being supernatural."

Elena shrugged again. She didn't know, but she didn't really want to test the theory.

"It's irrelevant," Stefan said. His voice was sharp. "They'd never get to Elena."

"The important thing is that now we know where Solomon will be in two nights," Jack said softly.

Stefan smiled. "Maybe we can get the jump on him this time."

It wasn't much, not yet, but it was the first crack they'd found in Solomon's armor. It was a beginning.



Deep in Germany's Black Forest, Damon sank down onto the trunk of a fallen tree. Dampness seeped through the legs of his expensive jeans, now rumpled and smeared with mud.

"I hate this," he complained, dropping his head into his hands. He was dirty and exhausted and, most of all, hungry. Thick, dark conifers rose around them, their heavy branches blocking out the sky.

Leaning against a nearby tree, Katherine glanced wearily at him without answering. Her light blond hair, usually smooth and perfect, was a tangled mess, and there was dirt on her face. Still, she was in better shape than Damon, he thought bitterly. At least she had been able to Influence people to let her feed.

They'd been fleeing across Europe for days, losing themselves in countless city crowds. Budapest, Paris, Berlin. But wherever they went, the packs of vampires had found them.

"We can't keep running," Damon said. "Maybe it's time we make a stand, choose a spot we can defend and take out as many of them as we can. We need to figure out who's behind this."

Katherine shook her head. "I don't know about you, but dying twice was enough for me. It's smarter to keep moving. We'll lose them eventually."

Damon felt a red wall of rage rising up in his mind. He was too old, too experienced, to be herded around like an animal, running from place to place in fear. Whoever was doing this, he wanted to rip them apart, feel their blood and flesh rend in his hands and between his teeth. "It would make me feel better if I killed someone," he muttered.

"Heavens." Katherine's tone was mocking. "Are you starting to regret the deal you made for little Elena? How does it go? You can't feed unless you

romance them first?”

“Stop it,” Damon said, suddenly feeling more tired than angry. “I’ll kill whoever’s behind this, that I promise you. The deal doesn’t apply to vampires.”

“Poor Damon,” Katherine said, a new, softer tone in her voice. When Damon looked up, she was standing right in front of him, looking at him with clear blue eyes—a shade lighter than Elena’s, his mind automatically categorized, but not really so different. She raised her wrist to her own mouth and bit down, opening her vein, and the forest was flooded with the rich scent of her blood. “Here, drink,” she said, holding her arm out to him. Damon stared at her, and her mouth tightened in annoyance. “You can’t keep going without anything to eat,” she snapped. “You’re a liability like this.”

“Well, I’d hate to be a burden,” Damon said with a shrug, taking her wrist and bringing it to his lips.

He hadn’t tasted Katherine’s blood since she first made him a vampire, and he was unprepared for the rush of memories it brought back to him. *A delicate girl, hardly more than a child, appearing at dusk in the rooms of his father’s palazzo. Her hair was a fine light gold, shining in the candlelight as she sank into a low curtsy. Her skin was so pale that he could see the fine blue tracery of her veins when she reached out for him, and her lips were cool when he lowered his head to meet them.*

Damon’s eyes were burning when he let go of Katherine’s hand. Her pale pink lips parted in surprise, and he wondered if she, too, had just been transported back in time. His heartbeat quickened as he felt Katherine’s blood running through him, warming him and bringing him strength. It wasn’t as good as feeding on a human, but it would keep him going for a while.

“Thank you, darling,” he said dryly.

Katherine’s voice was light. “This whole situation should teach you not to make deals with Guardians. They’re tricky, I hear.”

Damon was opening his mouth to answer when a sound in the distance made him pause. He cocked his head to listen and heard it again: the crackle of footsteps on dry leaves, coming toward them, fast. “They’ve found us,” he hissed.

He pulled his Power around him quickly, fiercely concentrating on the sensation of his own form dissolving and compacting. His bones thinned and reformed within him, changing shape, his fingers spreading into wings as his toes curled into claws. He had a moment to feel grateful for Katherine’s blood: This was difficult to manage when he wasn’t feeding regularly.

Then Damon, in the form of a crow, stretched his glossy black wings and rose past tree branches into the sky. He could feel the currents of air behind him shifting as Katherine took silent flight in the shape of a snowy owl.

They had escaped their enemies once more, for now. But Damon knew they couldn't keep going forever. Sooner or later, they would have to fight.

#TVD11KatherinetheTease

* * *

It was a warm, clear night. An almost-full moon shone overhead, and the scent of night-blooming jasmine rose up to Stefan on the balcony outside their apartment.

But Stefan wasn't here to appreciate the beauty of the evening. He sent out tendrils of his Power, questing, trying to sense whatever was out there. Why was he so *weak*?

Maybe Damon was right; maybe it was worth drinking human blood regularly for the strength it would give him. Stefan drank Elena's blood sometimes, and she drank his, but it was an act of love, not a feeding. He didn't take enough to make him strong. He swiped his hand across his face, irritated with himself, and tried to focus.

He couldn't sense anything. There was an Old One after Elena, who knew the loophole in her immortality and was sending humans after her. Stefan gripped the edge of the balcony and felt the metal begin to buckle beneath his hand. Conscientiously, he forced his fingers to relax. They didn't want to lose their security deposit.

Was that a footstep below, too light for human ears to hear? He froze, listening. The night was alive with a thousand sounds: insects buzzing, the soft beats of a bat's wings, the distant sound of traffic.

Again, almost right below, a footstep on the grass. Without stopping to think, Stefan launched himself over the rail, his canines lengthening as he leaped.

The warm, solid body beneath him let out a huff of surprise as he hit it, both of them slamming down on the ground. *Human*, he automatically classified, even as he reached for the throat.

It didn't matter. Human or not, he had to keep this person from Elena. But the realization slowed him a little, long enough for the figure underneath him to twist and kick hard at Stefan's chest. Stefan slammed him back onto the ground, baring his fangs—and then realized the person beneath him was Jack. For an instant, he didn't think he could stop. He didn't want to stop. Jack's heart was pounding, and Stefan's canines were sharp with anticipation. It

would be easy.

He let go and rolled to one side. Jack lay flat on the ground, panting, one hand pressed against his chest.

“You’re heavy,” he said finally.

“I’m sorry.” Stefan climbed to his feet and offered Jack a hand up. “I didn’t realize it was you. I’ve been a little tense lately.”

He could still hear Jack’s heart beating, hard and fast, as he rose. Stefan averted his eyes from the vein at the side of Jack’s neck, ignoring the thought of the rich blood rushing quickly beneath the skin. He needed to go out to the woods and feed properly, but guarding Elena was more important.

Jack brushed off his pants, which were covered with dirt. “Didn’t mean to startle you. I’m just patrolling, keeping an eye out.”

“I attacked too quickly,” Stefan said, guilt slamming heavily into him. “I should have made sure of who you were before I jumped on you.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” Jack waved a dismissive hand, although Stefan noticed he winced as he cautiously rolled his neck, checking to see if he was injured. “Guarding Elena is the important thing. Plus, I could totally take you down if I had to.”

Stefan smiled dutifully at the joke, then stared out into the darkness, watching and listening. Far off, a car started up and drove in the opposite direction. There was no one else nearby that he could sense. “He’s all I can think about,” he said. “Solomon, I mean.” Jack nodded, and Stefan went on. “We’d gotten to where the Old Ones weren’t coming after Elena anymore. I was hunting them instead. I thought all this was over.”

His hands curled into fists, and he felt his canines press sharp against his lips again, ready to bite. “We don’t know where he is, and he’s coming after Elena. I want to rip out his throat.” Stefan glanced at Jack, feeling oddly ashamed at the admission.

Jack patted Stefan lightly on the shoulder. “This is normal, Stefan,” he said reassuringly. “You feel this way because you’re a warrior. Even though you’re a vampire, you’re a hunter, too. That means you’re always prepared for a fight. And you have something worth fighting to protect.”

Stefan looked up at the darkened windows of their apartment. Extending his Power, he could feel Elena sleeping deeply, her dreams troubled, but her breathing even. Jack was right, he thought. Elena was Stefan’s to protect. She was worth fighting for.

“So the patient came in complaining of chest pains, but when we hooked him up to the EKG, he told us he’d changed his mind and that the pain was in his legs.” Jasmine came out of her bedroom, holding a long golden necklace around her neck. “Can you fasten this for me?”

“Uh-huh,” Matt said, looking out the window at the darkening sky. He had promised to meet Elena and the others at Dalcrest at nine, so they could canvass the hills around campus before midnight, when Solomon would show to meet the humans he’d influenced.

Matt knew he should leave, but he liked it here. Jasmine’s apartment was warm, filled with texture and color: handmade bowls in the kitchen, red-painted walls with heavy woven hangings in the living room, a velvety sofa. A cozy nest, far from violence and vampires and hunters.

“Matt?” Jasmine said, and the part of Matt’s mind that wasn’t already out the door registered that she’d said something a moment before.

“What?” he asked. Jasmine arched her brows meaningfully and wiggled the necklace a little. “Oh.” Matt moved her heavy fall of hair out of the way so he could work the catch. Her skin was honey golden and very smooth, and she smelled sweet. He stroked the back of her neck, once, twice, watching the tendrils of hair fall back into place around his fingers. “Why are you getting dressed up?”

Jasmine frowned. “Because we’re going out.” At Matt’s blank look, she rolled her eyes. “Honestly, where is your mind today? I swear, you haven’t heard a thing I’ve said in the last hour.”

Matt could feel his cheeks flushing, his ears getting hot. She was right; he hadn’t been listening. “I’m really sorry,” he said awkwardly. “I promised to meet Elena and Stefan tonight.”

“That’s okay,” Jasmine said, shrugging. “I’d have liked to have you to

myself, but I haven't seen them in ages." Looking at Matt's expression, her face fell and she added hesitantly. "If that's all right?"

"I'm sorry," Matt said. Her mouth trembled, and he hastened to add, "It's just, there's some stuff going on with them. They wanted to talk to me alone about it. Just this time."

"Oh." Jasmine wrapped a finger in her long curls, tugging them straight. Her mouth was still soft and hurt. "Okay, well, call me tomorrow." She said it breezily, but Matt could tell she was upset. She knew he was lying, he realized.

"I'll see you later," Matt said, his stomach tying itself in knots. He hesitated in the doorway. There was a cool wind blowing, and the full moon shone, heavy in the sky. He wanted to stay, wanted just to wrap himself up in her, in her honey skin and soft smile. Jasmine tilted her face up toward him and he kissed her gently.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said, his heart aching just a little bit.

And then he was on his way out into the night, shutting the door behind him.



"This customer's voice mailbox is full. Please try again later. Thank you," an electronic voice chirped. Elena pushed her phone's off button a little more violently than necessary.

Why hadn't Damon listened to any of her messages? He must have ignored every single one for his entire mailbox to be full.

"I'm worried about Damon," she told Stefan through the balcony doorway. He was pacing back and forth across the balcony, scowling at the tops of trees as if he could see straight through them to find someone lurking below.

"Damon's fine," he said absently.

"I don't think so," Elena said. "He's worried about something. I think he might be in danger."

Whenever she reached out to Damon through their shared connection, all she felt was a sort of grim anxiety. She closed her eyes and concentrated on their bond, but she couldn't get any clear picture, just images of forests and cities. It felt like he was running from something.

"If Bonnie were here, she could use a spell to contact him," she said, frustrated. "I wish ... I can't *do* anything."

Stefan finally looked up to meet Elena's gaze. His face softened, and he took the few steps across the balcony to stand before her. "Elena," he said, reaching out to touch her cheek. "Just because Damon isn't responding to you doesn't mean something's wrong. He's always been hard to pin down. He'll get in touch in his own time."

Elena shook her head. "This time is different. I'm worried," she said.

Tilting her chin up, Stefan gazed into Elena's eyes. "I know," he said. "But with everything going on here, Damon's probably safest of all of us. And even if he *is* in trouble, Damon's very, very good at taking care of himself. I wish he were here, too, but only because he could help protect you from Solomon."

"I'm not helpless, Stefan," Elena said sharply.

Stefan blinked in surprise at her tone. "I never said you were," he replied. "But you're the one Solomon's after. Don't worry about Damon; worry about yourself."

"Okay," Elena said, sighing inwardly. She knew Stefan was only trying to protect her. But she'd saved people, she'd killed Klaus; surely she could hold her own against any threat.

She tried her best to push away her anxiety over Damon. Whatever was going on with him, she couldn't do anything to help him now. No matter how strongly she felt that something was *wrong*.

* * *

Elena's sensation of wrongness didn't go away, not even later, when they met the others on the hills overlooking campus. It was a clear night, the full moon high. Zander and his Pack were in wolf form and alert, sniffing the wind, their ears cocked for any sound. One of them, Daniel, raced around the others to greet them, his heavy tail wagging, and Zander snapped at him, herding him back into place.

Once upon a time, Elena remembered, she hadn't been able to tell any of the wolves apart—except for Zander, with his snow-white fur. Now they were as distinct to her in wolf form as they were as humans. The reddish-tinged one that was Shay yelped a short bark at oversize Jared. He pulled his lips back in a lazy laugh, cocking his black-tipped ears. Tristan sprang at Enrique, growling playfully, and toppled him to the ground, where they rolled in a mock battle. Zander yipped once and they sprang apart guiltily, joining the rest of their group as the Pack paced the hillside.

There were a couple of hours yet till midnight. If they could just figure out where Solomon would come from, they could get into position, launch an

attack.

Elena shut her eyes and focused her Power, trying to force open the doors within herself that would help her track down evil. Nothing. With a huff of irritation, she opened her eyes again.

Matt was climbing up the hill toward Elena and Stefan. He carried a flashlight, which he cast over the trees and grass around them, but he didn't speak. He looked grim, his lips pressed tightly together.

Meredith and Alaric followed him, Alaric also holding a flashlight, while Meredith balanced her stave in one hand.

"Where do you think we should look?" Stefan asked, glancing at Meredith.

"If I were going to meet a bunch of brainwashed humans to get a report on their evil mission," Meredith said thoughtfully, "I'd head for a good, clear space with plenty of moonlight. He'll need light to see them, to Influence them. We could get into the tree cover near the biggest clearing and wait."

Stefan nodded. "Makes sense. The most open spot is up on top of the ridge. When Jack's team gets here, we'll head up."

Zander raised his head, his tail wagging, and a moment later, Jack and his group appeared over the crest of the hill. Jack and Roy raised their hands briefly, acknowledging Elena and the others, while Trinity shot Elena a warm smile. Darlene and Alex had their heads down, watching their step. Both carried heavy-looking bags of weapons.

"Looks like it's going to rain," Jack said in greeting when they reached them. Elena glanced up in surprise. It was true—black clouds had blocked out the moon while they talked, and the sky, clear a few moments ago, looked ominously heavy.

"That was fast," Alaric said uneasily. A cold wind blew across the hillside, lifting Elena's hair and bringing goose bumps out on her arms.

Meredith and Elena exchanged a worried glance. "Remember how Klaus could change the weather?" Elena said slowly. "Even Damon can make it storm, if he's angry enough."

Meredith swore. "Solomon knows we're here. He planned it."

"It's a trap. We need to get out of here." Stefan stepped closer to Elena, wrapping his arm around her shoulders protectively, his eyes scanning the tree cover around them. Her heart sped up. Which way could they go to escape? The dark shadows beneath the trees were suddenly menacing.

Something hit Elena's cheek, and she jumped. At almost the same moment, one of the wolves yelped. Her arm stung, hit by something sharp and heavy.

"Hail!" Alex shouted just as a burst of lightning cracked across the sky. Thunder rumbled, and the wind picked up, whipping stinging shards of hail into their faces.

Stefan was trying to shout something above the roar of the wind, and Elena huddled closer to him, shielding her head from the hail. "What?" she yelled back.

"Let's go!" he shouted. The hail was coming down faster now, ripping into the ground. Stefan swung Elena into his arms and began to run at top vampire speed for the cover of the trees, wolves and hunters on his tail. Elena peered over Stefan's shoulder to see Matt and Alaric bringing up the rear, their flashlight beams swinging wildly.

There was a flash of bright light all around them and thunder cracked again, closer this time. Stefan backpedaled, Meredith and Jack flinching back just as a tree fell in flames right in front of them. Elena felt the searing heat of the flames on her cheeks, close enough that her hair sizzled. Behind them, another deafening crash resounded as lightning hit and flames rose up, blocking their retreat.

They were all trapped.

Stefan's arms tightened around Elena. Bright ashes were blowing everywhere, setting the grass around them ablaze. She blinked the smoke out of her eyes and tried to see.

Trinity was shouting something, but Elena couldn't hear her over the crackle of the flames. With a grimace, the brown-haired girl pulled some sort of long scythe from the case on her shoulder. As they watched, she began to gouge the ground, tearing up a long strip of sod.

Meredith stared at her for a second, and then began to imitate her, using the sharp edges at the end of her stave to dig a trench.

They're getting rid of the grass so the fire can't get any closer, Elena realized. She struggled out of Stefan's arms and began to pull and yank at the grass as the rest of the hunters lowered their weapons to dig at the ground, making a firebreak. The wolves whined anxiously around them and one—Tristan, Elena thought, squinting through the smoke—gave a low, unhappy howl. She bent her head back down, pulling at the grass.

Hot ash scorched their skin, but soon they had carved out a fireproofed

circle of black dirt around them. They stood in a tight group at the center of the firebreak, the wolves on the outer rim, growling at the flames as if they could scare them into submission. A spark flew to land on Meredith's cheek, and she batted it off, wincing with pain. *This isn't going to work*, Elena realized, her heart sinking. They were still trapped, and Solomon's Power seemed limitless.

But as if the fire were losing interest in them, the flames began to die down, and the storm faded. "He's playing games," she told Stefan, as soon as the smoke had cleared enough for her to speak. "He could have killed us, but he's not trying, not yet. He wants us to be afraid of him."

"I know," Stefan said tightly. He looked down at her, his mouth a narrow line and his green eyes dark with worry. "I'm afraid of what's going to happen when he does try."

"I'm the one he wants," Elena said miserably. "You're all in danger because of me."

Dark steam was still rising from the ground around them. The stench of burning was everywhere.

But the fire was out, and the clouds were clearing. Looking up, Elena saw that the moon shone peacefully overhead once more. If not for the damage that had been done to her friends—Jared's fur was ragged and scorched, burned right off in a couple of places, and a long red burn was rising on Darlene's cheek—she could almost believe she'd imagined the whole thing.

Matt coughed, a deep, rattling cough, and waved the smoke away.

"We know he's *somewhere*," Jack exclaimed, his face smudged with soot. "He's in the area. Even he doesn't have enough Power to do this from too far away. It's the best lead we've ever had, because he's not going to leave—" He broke off.

"Until I'm dead," Elena finished, her voice flat.

Jack winced, looking apologetic.

"We will not use Elena as bait," Stefan said coldly. "Our first priority is keeping her safe."

"But I won't be safe until we find Solomon," Elena told him, guilt stabbing through her chest. Everyone was risking their lives for her, and so far she hadn't been able to do anything to help, despite all her Power. "Look, I haven't been much use in tracking him. I think we should call in Andrés. Maybe he can help."

Just thinking of Andrés made Elena feel better. He'd taught her how to

access and control her Power, but more than that, he was her friend. Andrés was wise. He understood Elena, and his Guardian Power, while different from her own, was equally strong.

“We can do this,” she told the others, looking at the dying flames all around them. “We’re not going to give up until we find Solomon, and kill him.”

#TVD11LightningStrikes

The flames burned fiercely, yellow and orange with a flash of cold azure at the base. Frowning with concentration, Bonnie refused to be pulled into their hypnotic patterns. She clutched her falcon charm tight in one hand and breathed deeply, calling upon the stone's properties.

The charm Damon had given her was made of blue lace agate, which contained the properties of tranquility, and balance between mind, body, and spirit. This balance allowed Bonnie to access more Power than she'd ever dreamed of.

The falcon was cool in her palm, the sharp points of its beak and claws almost painful as she clutched it, yet somehow the little sharp pricks were reassuring. Bonnie could feel her own energy flowing into the stone and then circling back to her, calmer and steadier. After a few moments, she turned this Power outward to the flames, as easily as flipping a switch.

The flames flickered once and then went out.

Bonnie's new friends burst into applause and came up to congratulate her. Poppy squeezed her shoulders in a side hug, while Rick thumped her enthusiastically on the back. Marilise, always more reticent, hung back, but the smile on her face was one of pure delight. Bonnie smiled back at her proudly.

"Bonnie, that was amazing!" Alysia was grinning so widely that her freckles flowed together in little islands of brown across her cheeks. "I can't believe how far you've come in such a short time!"

Bonnie really couldn't believe it either. Finding her working stone had been a big step. The fact that it had come from the necklace Damon had sent her for her birthday couldn't be a coincidence. Sometimes he *knew* things about her; she was sure of it.

During the short time she had been with this group, she'd learned so much. Rick had turned out to know more about astrology and the influence of the stars and planets than anyone Bonnie had ever met. Marilise grew her own herbs at her cottage in North Carolina and had, in her gentle, quiet way, shown Bonnie helpful new ways of using them. And Poppy could see the future in crystal balls and cards—with more control than Bonnie had ever had over her own visions.

Tonight they, and all the other groups, had gotten a chance to demonstrate their new skills to everyone else.

Now Bonnie, full of gratitude, pulled Alysia into a spontaneous hug. "Thank you," she said. "If you hadn't talked me into coming here, I never could have done that. Every day, I can feel myself getting stronger and stronger."

Alysia's grin spread even wider, and she squeezed Bonnie back affectionately. "I'm glad you're here. You're making me look good." She stuck out her tongue playfully at an older man on the other side of the room, and he threw back his head and laughed. There was a core group of five who had organized the retreat, and each was in charge of mentoring a group of recruits. Alysia had said there was a friendly rivalry among the core group as to whose protégés would learn the most.

Bonnie glanced around the massive apartment, which had seemed so frightening at first but was now almost cozy, full of magic. It took up three floors of the building, complete with balconies and a roof deck. It felt like an expensive, grown-up version of a college dorm, Bonnie thought, communal and built for temporary living rather than someone's home.

"And now for the feast!" Alysia exclaimed, leading Bonnie to the dining room as the others followed. "It's a celebration," she explained. "So we threw together something special."

A wall of windows covered one wall of the dining room, looking out over the car headlights tracing a river of light far below. Alysia had created one of her beautiful illusions—pale flower petals falling ceaselessly from the ceiling, disappearing before they hit the floor.

The long table in the center of the room was heaped with food: a hodgepodge of everyone's favorites, from roast chicken to curry to peanut brittle to a bright pile of stir-fried vegetables. "Yum," Bonnie said and took a seat. "It's like a magic menu."

"I wish," Alysia said, rolling her eyes. "We were working on this all afternoon."

Bonnie was reaching for a platter of pork chops when her phone rang. Zander. “Oh, I need to take this. I’ll be right back,” she said, excusing herself and slipping out of the dining room.

“Hey,” she answered, once she was alone back in the mosaic-floored living room where she had first met her team. “How’s it going? I miss you.”

“Sure you do.” Zander’s voice sounded rougher than usual, tired, but she could hear the smile in it. “That’s because I’m *awesome*.”

“Modest, too,” Bonnie told him. She wandered over to a window and looked out at the streets far below. “How are things there?” Zander didn’t say anything for a moment, and Bonnie tensed. “What’s going on?”

“I’m thinking,” Zander said. “How’s witch camp?”

“Witch camp is fantastic. Soon I will be the queen of all witches. Seriously, I’m getting really strong.” She wanted to go into more detail, tell Zander all the amazing things she was learning to do, but she didn’t like the way he had paused when she asked him what was going on back home. His voice wasn’t quite right—he sounded worried. She used her firmest tone. “What do you mean you’re *thinking*? Give me a straight answer. Is everything okay?”

Zander sighed. “The Old One—Solomon—is getting closer. He’s sent compelled humans after us. And he killed Elena’s cat. Last night, we thought we had him, but we just stumbled into a trap.” He paused. “He drew lighting and fire down around us.”

Bonnie stiffened, feeling the blood drain out of her cheeks. Fire was one thing that the Pack *couldn’t* fight. “I’m coming home,” she said.

“No.”

“You need me.” She was already crossing the living room, heading for the stairs that would lead to her bedroom. She could pack and be at the airport in an hour, catch the next flight to Richmond or Washington, D.C. ... “You’ll pick me up at the airport, right?”

“Bonnie, stop,” Zander insisted. “Listen to me.”

“I have to be there!”

“We can handle it!” Zander said loudly, and Bonnie stopped in her tracks.

“If you’re in danger—”

“We’ve got the Pack,” Zander interrupted. “We’ve got hunters; we’ve got Stefan. We’ve got Elena, and she’s bringing her other Guardian friend out. Solomon’s tough, but there’s a whole superhero alliance here.”

Bonnie felt like her heart was being squeezed. “You don’t need me?” she said in a tiny voice.

“Of course we need you,” Zander said, his voice warm and reassuring. “I need you. Even when you’re not here, you’re helping protect us. We’re all using the charms and everything you left. But right now, you need to stay there, keep working on your own stuff. You’ll be stronger than ever when you come back, and then you’ll fix whatever we haven’t taken care of yet. Trust me and the Pack and the others for now, okay?”

Wavering, Bonnie closed her eyes for a moment. Her friends were in danger.

But it was true that she needed to be stronger if she was really going to be useful. The agate falcon rested cool against her collarbone—it never seemed to get warm—and she tried to take comfort in its calming properties.

“Trust us,” Zander said again. “We want you back, but not till you’re ready. Believe me, I miss you like crazy, but it’ll all be okay. We’ll hold down the fort.”

“Okay.” Bonnie bit her lip. “I’m going to learn everything that might help us, and then I’m on the first plane back.”

I hope I’m doing the right thing, she thought.



Stefan stared at the row of small white bottles on the drugstore shelf and looked at Elena's list again. *Moisturizer*, he read. It seemed like that ought to be simple, but there were fifteen different brands lined up in front of him, divided into different categories: *revitalizing*, he read, and *tone correcting*, and *age defying*.

Age defying? Stefan shook his head. Elena was going to look eighteen forever; surely that wasn't the one she wanted.

His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket, hoping it wasn't Elena with more additions to the shopping list.

Damon, said the display.

A bubble of relief rose up in Stefan's chest. He'd been positive that Damon was fine and would get back in touch when he was ready, and he'd been right. But it was nice to have it confirmed.

"Elena's been worried about you," Stefan said in greeting when he answered the phone.

"I guess the Guardians' bond is still good, then. Nice to know they do quality work," Damon answered. His voice sounded tired, rougher than Stefan was used to hearing it, and very far away.

"Damon?" Stefan asked, gripping the phone. "Are you okay? Where are you?"

There was a shifting, as if Damon was looking around. "Let's see," he said. "Casinos. Sunshine. Yachts. Monaco. Not for long, though, I'm afraid."

"What's going on?" Stefan asked, grabbing a bottle of moisturizer at random and tossing it into his basket. There was a long silence on the other end of the line, and he shifted the phone to his other ear. "Are you there?"

Damon sighed. “There’s something after Katherine and me,” he said, sounding a little embarrassed. “Wherever we go, packs of vampires come after us. I wanted to know if you had any idea who they are or what’s going on. They’re strong, and there are a lot of them. It’s nothing we can’t handle,” Damon added quickly. “But it’s getting tiresome.”

“That sounds strange,” Stefan began, worried, and then something Damon had said finally clicked. “Wait—you’re traveling with *Katherine*?” he asked sharply. “Is she hunting for you?” *Trust Damon to find a way around the rules the Guardians gave him*, he thought. And Katherine, of all people: After everything she’d done, how could Damon trust her?

“You think I’m cheating?” Damon asked, his voice flattening dangerously. “You should know better than anyone, I always keep my word.” There was a long pause, and Stefan kneaded the bridge of his nose between two fingers, feeling guilty. He always assumed the worst of Damon, but that wasn’t fair.

Damon sighed again, wearily. “I didn’t call to fight, little brother,” he said. “I just want to know if you have any idea what’s going on.”

“Right. Sorry. I don’t want to fight either. I know you’re not hunting,” Stefan apologized. It was true: Damon wouldn’t take an unwilling victim, not with Elena so linked to him that she’d be able to tell. “Well, I don’t know if this is related, but there’s another Old One here in town. Solomon. And he’s after Elena.”

“After Elena?” Damon’s voice got sharper, focused. A woman said something behind him—*Katherine*, Stefan realized—and he replied, his voice muffled, then came back on the line. “Is Elena in danger?”

“It’ll be okay. I’ve hunted a lot of Old Ones since you left. And you know how strong Elena is,” Stefan said. There was no point in making Damon worry; he couldn’t do anything more than the rest of them could. Which seemed to be nothing at this point. “Andrés just got here to help us track Solomon down.”

“And then bing, boom, you’ll take him out,” Damon said lightly. “Nice to know you’ve got things under control. I don’t see how this could be related, though. The vampires coming after us aren’t Old Ones. If anything, they feel ... new.”

“New like newly made?” Stefan said. “You should be able to handle them easily, then.”

Damon laughed a short, dry laugh. “You’d think so,” he said. “No, it’s not that they feel newly made, exactly, they’re just ... *different*, I suppose.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense, Damon,” Stefan told him. The drugstore was almost empty, but the elderly cashier was peering at him from the other end of the aisle, her eyebrows raised. Stefan turned away from her, hunching his shoulders. He needed to keep his voice down. That was the problem with small towns: Someone was always watching you.

“When you’ve dealt with your little problem there, why don’t you come out here?” Damon said. There was an artificial lightness to his voice as he added, “Come on, Stefan. It’ll be fun. A little gambling, a little sailing, a little vampire killing. When was the last time you were in Monaco?”

“I can’t,” Stefan said automatically. “I need to be here to protect Elena.”

There was another long pause, and Damon said, grimly, “I thought you said she was fine.”

“She is, but ...” Stefan could hear his own voice rising in irritation, and he stopped himself. Damon was his brother, and he’d saved Stefan’s life more than once.

And he knew that, if Damon suspected how bad things were, he would come rushing back to fight on their side. He was better off out of it.

“I’m sorry,” Stefan said, his voice gentle. “Elena will be fine. And I know you and Katherine will survive. You always do.”

“I hope so,” Damon said. “But it sounds like you’ve made your choice, anyway.” The line went dead. Stefan stared down at the phone in his hand for a moment, wondering if he should call Damon back. The cashier down at the end of the store was still watching him. He tucked the phone back into his pocket.

Damon’s tone had been bitter at the end, and Stefan felt bad about it, he really did. His brother had called to ask him for help, something he rarely did, and Stefan had turned him down. Guilt ran sharp through his veins. He couldn’t worry about Damon, he reminded himself. Damon would be fine. It was Elena who mattered.



“Marisol’s amazing,” Andrés said happily. “We’ve been doing research in the rain forest, classifying plants no one knew about before, and we both love it. The life force there is so wonderful; even though she’s not a Guardian, I think she feels it as much as I do.”

Elena watched Andrés’s smile light up his face, his warm brown eyes shine. She remembered how much sorrow he’d carried with him when they first met, after the death of the man who’d raised him. It was good to see the joy shining through him now.

“I’m so happy for you,” she said, squeezing her friend’s hand. “Have you told her you’re a Guardian?”

“Of course.” Andrés sounded surprised. “How could we love each other if she didn’t know the truth about me?”

Elena thought of Matt’s insistence on keeping the supernatural hidden from Jasmine, and shook her head. “I don’t think you could, not forever,” she agreed, feeling a pang of sorrow for Matt.

Stefan’s key rattled in the lock, and Elena and Andrés looked up, smiling in welcome. Stefan smiled back automatically, his eyes searching out Elena’s as they always did. As he leaned over to kiss her hello, Elena noticed tight lines of tension around his mouth.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

“I talked to Damon,” Stefan told her.

“You did?” Relief flooded through Elena, mixed with a slightly miffed feeling: Damon had called Stefan, but not her? After all the messages she had left him? “Is he okay? Where is he?”

“He’s fine,” Stefan said. “He’s in Monaco.”

Monaco. Glamorous, full of life. Sounded like Damon. But then, why the angry, anxious emotions that had streamed—were *still* streaming—through the connection between them? “Did he get my messages?” she asked hesitantly. “And the e-mails?”

“He didn’t say,” Stefan told her. “We didn’t talk for very long.”

Elena frowned. “Well, why—” But Stefan was avoiding her eyes, his face closed off tightly. There was something he didn’t want to tell her. Elena bit her lip. Maybe she should let it rest for now. “I’m glad he’s all right, anyway,” she said. “And wait till you hear what we figured out.”

Andrés cleared his throat and broke into a grin, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “We were talking over the situation,” he said, “and I thought of something that may help. Once, back when I first came into my Powers, I needed to trace an animal spirit who had been making trouble in town. The problem was, no one knew who the spirit was: She could have taken any kind of human disguise. My mentor, Javier, and I worked together and I learned how to do, er ...” He waved his hand impatiently, looking for the words. “I guess you’d call it a vision spell? I was able to channel my Power through something we knew the spirit had seen in the past and find my way back to what she was seeing in the present.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Stefan said.

Elena bounced on her heels, tugging at his sleeve in her excitement. “If we find something that we know Solomon has looked at, Andrés might be able to see what Solomon’s looking at *now!*” she exclaimed. “We could figure out where he’s hiding!”

“But we don’t know what he’s seen,” Stefan said, frowning. “The things that happened here, with Sammy and my stave, he must have compelled humans to do.”

“The ice?” Elena wondered. “He wasn’t there, but he must have seen it somehow, right? Could we use the windows, or the bed ...?”

Andrés was shaking his head. “I think it has to be something more specific,” he said. “Something Solomon actually laid eyes on, rather than controlling from a distance. And something recent, so a lot of people haven’t seen it since he did. Too many people have been in and out of this apartment since then.”

There was a baffled silence as they all thought.

“The car accident,” Stefan said suddenly. Andrés and Elena stared at him, and then Elena began to smile.

“Of course,” she said. “He would have watched, wouldn’t he? That open road, surrounded by tree cover. It would have been easy for him.” She got up and disappeared into the bedroom. “I haven’t worn this shirt since that day,” she said, coming out with a white shirt in one hand. “I washed out as much of the blood as I could, but it still needs to be dry-cleaned.”

Andrés took it from her, turning the soft fabric over in his hands. “I’ll try,” he said. “Help me. The more Power we can put into this, the better.” Elena took his hand and they both closed their eyes. For several moments, the only sound in the room was their breathing, deep and slow and in time with each other. Stefan held perfectly still.

Elena’s blue eyes and Andrés’s brown ones flew open at the same moment.

“Shining metal,” Andrés said. “A young girl, fighting a tall dark-haired man. No, they’re working out, very formal movements. A big open room.”

“That’s what Jack’s seeing, not Solomon,” Elena said instantly. “Jack saw me in that shirt, too. He must be training with his team.”

“Okay, yes.” Andrés’s eyes were tracking back and forth rapidly, but Elena was sure he wasn’t seeing the room they were in. “A library. Wooden tables, books. Oh, this one feels familiar. Meredith.” He swallowed and tried again, his eyes moving faster. “Oh! I’m seeing through Stefan’s eyes now.”

His gaze focused for a moment, snapping out of the trance. “That was curious, seeing myself from outside.”

“Try again,” Elena said. “Push past the people you recognize if you can. I think, other than Jack, Solomon would be the only stranger.”

“Okay.” They closed their eyes and breathed together for a moment, then began again. This time Andrés didn’t speak immediately, his eyes moving more slowly back and forth, as if he was looking hard for something. There was a silence.

Elena was frowning, still holding tightly to Andrés hand, but her gaze shifted to meet Stefan’s. “The apple men,” she said slowly. “The ones who attacked us. They said something about Solomon having yellow eyes.”

The fact had gotten lost in everyone’s excitement over the supposed clue to *where* Solomon was going to be, but that was a clue, too, wasn’t it? The idea of yellow eyes teased at the back of her mind, reminding her of something, but she couldn’t quite place it.

“Does knowing he has yellow eyes help, Andrés?” Stefan asked quietly.

Andrés didn’t answer, but his eyes moved a little faster. When he spoke, he sounded breathless. “A big room,” he said. “Wainscoting, paneling. I can see a formal garden through the windows.” He frowned. “There’s a woman. No, a mannequin. In a long dress, blue, with a full skirt. A large fireplace.”

Stefan looked baffled. “An old mansion?” he asked doubtfully. “Something at the college, maybe?”

But Elena knew. “The Plantation Museum,” she gasped. “Down near the river. It’s got to be.”

Spontaneously, she hugged Andrés, then jumped to her feet and hurled herself into Stefan’s arms. “We can do it,” she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder. “We’ve finally got him.”

Stefan nodded and held her close for a second. His arms were strong around her, and, when he kissed her, soft and sweet, she felt a flash of how he wanted to protect her, hold her here forever safe in his arms.

Finally he let go and headed for the closet where they kept his weapons. “Call the others,” he said. “We should attack tonight.”



Meredith felt as tense as the string of a bow, taut and ready to fire. “And I have a crossbow,” she muttered to herself, “so that’s convenient.”

The weapon was smooth and reassuringly heavy in her hand, and she had her hunter’s stave strapped to her back. When she got close enough for the stave to be useful, she would drop the bow.

The sun was setting, its last long rays coloring the horizon. Meredith, Alaric, and Stefan were coming up on the east side of the Plantation Museum, concealed behind the remnants of what had once been slave cabins. Jack’s team, Matt, and the Pack would be circling around the house, ready to approach from any angle.

Her earpiece crackled to life as Jack’s voice said, “In position,” and Trinity answered “In position.”

“In position,” Meredith repeated. Alaric glanced over as he pulled out a crossbow of his own and headed farther into the garden: As the least powerful fighters, he and Matt were supposed to stick to the long-range weapons, keeping their distance from Solomon and whoever was in the house with him. Andrés would hang back, too, wielding his Guardian Powers if he could.

Stefan slipped away from them around the side of the cabins. A minute later, his voice chimed in. “In position.”

The earpieces belonged to Jack’s team, another clever tool from their arsenal. Meredith couldn’t believe she had never thought of using them before. It allowed them all—except for the Pack, who were in wolf form right now—to coordinate their attack from all over the museum and its grounds, fully aware of what everyone else was doing. And the Pack had their own forms of communication, could fight as a unit with no need for speech.

They were all here, and ready. Everyone but Elena. It felt weird to go into

a fight without Elena, but Stefan had insisted: Solomon wanted Elena dead, and she would stay as far from him as possible. Elena had argued, but finally had agreed to go to the movies; Solomon wouldn't come after her in the middle of a crowded theater. Or so they all hoped.

Elena's lethal blood was with them, though. A thin coat, mixed with water, had been applied to the killing edge of every weapon they carried, and filled the tiny hypodermics in the ends of Meredith's special hunter's stave. Meredith only hoped there would be enough to do the job.

The sun sank below the horizon, and the dim security lamps around the museum snapped on. Meredith tested her bowstring and fitted an arrow carefully into place.

At first she'd instinctively objected to the idea of coming after a vampire at night. But the Plantation Museum was full of visitors and workers during the day, and none of them were willing to endanger innocent people if they could possibly help it.

Now Andrés just had to use his Power, strengthened by the life force of the plants in the garden, to sense if Solomon was still seeing the museum, and they could begin. Meredith's earpiece crackled again, and Andrés's voice came through, hushed and excited. "He's here. Solomon's inside the house. He's facing a wall, so I can't tell which floor he's on."

Meredith adjusted her grip on her crossbow and slipped forward. The night was silent, almost as if she were alone, but she knew that all around her the others were coming forward, tightening around Solomon's hiding place like a noose.

A shadowy figure crossed in front of the mansion—a guard, Meredith realized, and she glanced to her right. One of the wolves was already skulking through the bushes toward the figure. He raised his head and looked back at her, cocking his ears forward in a prearranged signal. *A vampire, not a compelled human.*

Without hesitating, Meredith aimed the crossbow and fired. There was a soft thwack as the bolt found its mark. The vampire fell with a thud. Meredith hurried across the open lawn, staying low, the wolf keeping pace beside her.

She knelt to check the vampire and found the bolt had gone through his heart. The wolf—Daniel, she now realized—sniffed cautiously at the wound and then looked up at Meredith, giving her a single tail wag of approval.

"Guard down. Ready," she said softly, touching her earpiece. In a single movement, she dropped the crossbow, took her stave from its sheath. The others were heading through windows and side doors. Meredith rested her

hand for a moment on the rough gray fur of Daniel's back for reassurance; then together they slipped through the museum's front entrance.

By the door stood a hoopskirted mannequin, its blank face framed by a full curled wig, meant to represent the lady of the house back in the old plantation days. It filled so much space that it took Meredith a moment to realize there was a person at the admissions desk behind it.

She hesitated for a second too long. The tall, elegant blonde behind the desk looked natural there, like any museum docent—except for the fangs that she bared at them. Another vampire of Solomon's. She started to lunge at Meredith, and Meredith ducked quickly, raising her stave, knowing she was too late, that her split second of delay would prove fatal.

Then there was a crash of shattering glass as, faster than any human could move, Stefan hurtled through the window, grabbing the woman and swinging her around. He snapped her neck in a single, clean motion. Meredith moved forward to stake the woman in the heart, her movements perfectly matched to Stefan's, as they always were.

"Thanks," she said, when she'd caught her breath. He nodded in response, turning toward the hall. Meredith turned with him, raising her stave in anticipation.

They could hear the others all over the mansion, glass shattering and the sound of blows. A wolf snarl came from a room farther down. Daniel tensed and slipped quietly past them, the fur on his shoulders bristling. Footsteps thudded down the stairs.

Stefan stood a little in front of her, his whole body tense and ready, his teeth bared. He held his machete easily in one hand. He looked like something primal and wild, Meredith thought fleetingly, like a warrior out of prehistory.

And then Solomon's minions burst through the door.

Meredith didn't think after that, just slid smoothly into battle, kicking and leaping and twisting as her hunter instincts commanded, her stave slicing through the air. A dark-haired vampire girl lunged for her throat, and Meredith stabbed her smoothly through the heart.

She was aware of Stefan working fluidly next to her, their blows and parries complementing each other's instinctively. They turned together, cutting the heads neatly off a pair of vampires. Blood geysered up from the vampires' throats, splattering the walls, and the bodies fell to the floor with a thud.

Then the room was empty, except for the four vampire corpses, lying on a

floor slick with blood. Meredith and Stefan finally turned to look at each other, breathing heavily.

They could hear the sounds of the battle still going on throughout the lower floor of the mansion—a muffled cry, the angry clang of metal weapons colliding, the sharp barks of the Pack. Nodding at Stefan, Meredith raised her stave once more, and they went forward together into the fight.

They moved swiftly and silently through the museum. A vampire came toward Meredith and she sidestepped his blow, sweeping his feet out from under him with one kick. Before the vampire could hit the floor, Stefan had torn off his head.

It's like a dance, Meredith thought, half-dazed. Something about the smooth interplay between her and Stefan, the sweep of their weapons and the strikes of their limbs, worked like the best dancing couples. They didn't need to speak; she could sense his movements almost before they happened.

Three vampires raced across the hall in front of them, Darlene in hot pursuit as she pulled the trigger of her flamethrower. A jet of fire caught one of the vampires, and he gave a high, terrified scream as he burned.

Alex was halfway up the stairs, three vampires surrounding him, but he had a fierce grin on his face and an actual broadsword in his hand—even in the midst of battle, Meredith couldn't help being amazed by that—moving so quickly it was barely more than a blur of metal.

They passed a roped-off living room, where Tristan was tearing the throat out of a vampire, the fur of his muzzle matted with gore.

There was no sign of a vampire with yellow eyes.

At last, Meredith and Stefan came to a deserted dining room laid as if for a holiday feast. Silver and crystal sparkled, and a fake suckling pig, shiny with varnish, took pride of place on the table. This was the first room Meredith had come to where the walls were not spattered with blood, the hand-blocked wallpaper cleanly traced with Victorian vines and blossoms.

Stefan tensed, hearing a sound Meredith couldn't make out, and whipped around toward the door—but it was only Jack and Trinity, blood-spattered though seemingly uninjured. Zander and Shay, wolf-formed, padded in through a door at the other end of the room. They were bloody, too, and Zander was limping, but their tails were high with triumph.

“We've been through the rooms upstairs, but we didn't find any sign of Solomon,” Jack said, scrubbing a hand over his tired face and smearing more blood across his cheek. “I think we have to face that he's disappeared again.

Even though Andrés thought he was here.”

Trinity leaned back against the wall, her usually cheerful face glum. “Maybe it was a trick all along,” she said. “He likes to tease us. Finding him like this seemed too easy.”

Meredith’s shoulders slumped. Had they really fought so hard, for nothing? Stefan was gripping the machete so tightly his knuckles were white with strain.

“No,” he said, almost choking on his rage. “It’s not acceptable. We have to end this.”

“Maybe we do,” a light, cultivated voice interrupted from the doorway. Meredith tried to turn, tried to raise her stave, but she suddenly found that she couldn’t move.

Slow, deliberate footsteps crossed the floor behind her. The room had become very cold.

There was a rush of Power, and Zander slammed back against the wall, his paws scrabbling helplessly, long claws scraping against the floor. The Power flung Shay through the window, the glass shattering as her thick-furred body slammed through it.

As frost began to form in Meredith’s hair, Solomon finally stepped into her field of vision. He was good-looking in a harsh way, tall, all lean muscles and graceful, purposeful movement, dressed simply in jeans and a shirt. Tawny hair fell to the nape of his neck, and his features were sharply cut. He could have passed for a human on the street.

He glanced at Meredith as he passed, and she slammed backward as if she’d been shoved, her head banging hard against the wall, her teeth jarring with the impact.

“Stefan.” Solomon stopped to peer into the younger vampire’s face. He sounded amused. “I thought you’d find me.” He raised a hand and touched Stefan’s face gently. Blood began to run from Stefan’s nose, coating his chin and running down his neck. Solomon watched him for a few moments, then made a soft, discontented sound and turned away.

A moment later, he was gazing into Meredith’s face. His eyes were almost golden, she saw, and bright with malice. “Meredith,” Solomon said, as if he knew her. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” He watched her carefully, and she felt herself growing colder and colder. Something tightened inside her head with a sharp snap, and a hot stream ran down her face—blood, she realized, like Stefan. “Oh, no,” he said, sighing, and made a wry face. “A

pity.” He moved on to Trinity and Jack, across the room. The painful tightness in Meredith’s head eased a little but didn’t end.

Trinity looked as if she’d been caught about to speak, her mouth partially open. She was as still as a mannequin. Beside her, the window was silvered with frost. Meredith was freezing.

“Jack!” Solomon peered delightedly into the hunter’s face. “You’ve been looking for me for a long time, haven’t you?” Meredith wondered what the Old One was doing, why he was toying with them. She was reminded of making rounds at her wedding reception: greeting everyone, making small talk.

She couldn’t see Solomon’s face, but she figured he was doing to Jack whatever it was he’d done to her and Stefan, expected to see Jack’s face running with blood. Instead she heard Solomon chuckle, a sudden, surprised sound. “Oh,” he said. “No, you won’t do at all.”

Solomon moved on again, and Meredith could see that Jack wasn’t bleeding after all. There was a thin coating of frost on him, though, and his eyes looked furious.

“Hello, Trinity,” Solomon said, and there was a new note in his voice, almost ... thoughtful. His hand traced over Trinity’s shoulder, long fingers running across her collarbone. “You’re strong. And tall, I like tall. Maybe you’re worth my time.” The cold in the room intensified sharply, and Meredith felt as if her skin, unable to shiver, might crack like the glass of Elena’s windows.

“Maybe,” Solomon said again, sounding pleased. Meredith couldn’t see what he was doing to Trinity—his body was blocking her view of his hands, but they were on Trinity’s face. Then he stepped back and Meredith had a moment to feel relief: The girl was unchanged, her mouth still frozen in shock.

But as Meredith watched in horror, a thin tendril of blood began to run from Trinity’s open mouth, tracing over her chin and onto the floor. A moment later, blood was running from her nose, dripping like tears from her eyes. So much blood, much more than had come from Stefan or Meredith. Solomon cocked his head, watching Trinity closely, his tongue running across his lips. Her hair matted as blood began to run from her ears.

“Pretty,” Solomon said, his voice a warm purr. “I *like* this one.”

No, no, no, Meredith thought frantically. *I have to do something!* The blood was freezing on Trinity’s face, her nostrils caking with dark red ice. She was still motionless, but now there was the faintest choking noise coming

from her. Solomon leaned forward, intent. *Help!* Meredith thought, still unable to move.

Near the window, something shifted.

Meredith stared as one of the vines in the wallpaper twisted, lengthening across the wall. Was she going crazy? Suddenly the wallpaper was writhing with vines, the flowers expanding as the tendrils reached the carpet and continued to spread.

And the room was getting warmer. The blood on Trinity's face was thawing and beginning to flow again.

Andrés, she thought. It must be Andrés. He had Power over life and growing things; this warmth and motion must come from him.

Solomon, focused on Trinity, didn't seem to notice the wallpaper. A single vine ran across the table, nudging the fake suckling pig with a scraping noise, and Meredith held her breath. Whatever was happening, they needed Solomon unaware.

Wait a second, she realized—she *held her breath*. However Solomon had frozen her in place, taken her power over her own body, his Influence was fading. Carefully, she flexed her muscles, and her fingers tightened slowly on her stave. She couldn't move her arms, not yet, but she blinked and shifted her gaze to Stefan. He had straightened and was glaring at Solomon, his whole body tensed.

A vine wrapped itself around Solomon's ankle. With a grunt, he pulled away, his concentration on Trinity broken. Another, thicker vine whipped itself around his waist, and he snarled, tearing it off.

In that moment, Stefan struck. He leaped forward and swung his machete high overhead, its blade coated in Elena's blood, slamming it down to slice cleanly through Solomon's skull and torso.

For one moment, Solomon held together, a line of blood running straight down from his forehead to his waist. Then, with a sickening squelch, his body fell in two clean pieces onto the floor.

Everything was very quiet.

Solomon's control over her broke with a sudden snap. Shuddering, Meredith took a long, shaky gasp of air, and everything came back into focus.

Stefan was breathing hard, his eyes wide and dark, his canines extended. Meredith hurried to his side and began kicking the sections of Solomon's body apart, just in case he had some regenerative Power. "We did it," she started to say, "we—" But she broke off as Trinity collapsed behind her, her

body shaking in sudden and terrifying convulsions.

Jack rushed to kneel beside his fellow hunter. “She’s still bleeding,” he said urgently, his hands moving carefully over her.

The doors at both ends of the dining room slammed open as the others started to spill in. “We were frozen in that parlor upstairs,” Darlene explained, then gasped, seeing Trinity. “Oh my God!” She ran to kneel on the girl’s other side. Alex and Roy followed, their faces shocked. Shay scrambled back through the window, girl formed again and swearing, her face and arms dotted with tiny cuts.

There was a pounding of boots in the hall, and Matt pushed his way through a crowd of werewolves, dangling a crossbow from one hand and pulling Andrés with the other. “Andrés did it,” he announced. “He just pulled the life force out of that garden and sent it *racing* through here. The whole picture of what was going on was hanging before us like some kind of vision or something. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Andrés nodded, looking drained but triumphant.

The smiles dropped off both their faces as they saw Trinity’s body, now terribly still, lying surrounded by her friends. “Is she ...?” Matt asked, a quaver in his voice.

Zander rose to his feet, changing from wolf to man in one motion. “We have to get her to a hospital,” he said, nodding to his Pack. “Jared, Dan, find something you can use as a stretcher.” The two nodded and began to rise, but Jack stepped forward, shaking his head firmly.

“Stop,” he said. “We can’t take her to a hospital like this. I don’t think it’ll help. Whatever Solomon did to her, they can’t fix. And those are impossible injuries. There will be too many questions.” He and Zander stared at each other, both steely with determination.

“We can’t let her *die*,” Roy protested, a note of desperation in his voice.

“No one’s going to die,” Stefan said quietly. There was blood running through his hair and spattered across his face from the death blow he’d dealt Solomon, but his voice was so full of authority that both Jack and Zander, each a leader in his own right, turned to listen. “We’ll take her to my apartment.” He swiftly bit at his wrist and held it to Trinity’s slack mouth, rubbing her throat with his other hand to force the unconscious girl to swallow. “My blood will help for now. I just hope it’s enough.”

Zander and Jack both nodded. At the gesture, Daniel and Jared went and cleared the dining table, taking the cloth to put carefully under Trinity. The girl moaned in pain, her head turning restlessly from one side to the other as

they tried to shift her, her eyes moving frantically beneath their lids. Meredith wasn't sure whether it was a good or bad sign that Trinity didn't wake up.

She made her way through the crowd of hunters and werewolves over to Matt and Andrés. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly. Matt was frowning, his gaze on Trinity but his eyes distant, as if he was thinking hard. Andrés leaned against him, looking shaky and disoriented.

"Yeah," Matt said, blinking. "Yeah, I'm fine. I have to go do something, though. Can you help Andrés? Using that much Power took a lot out of him. He can barely stand." Carefully, he shifted Andrés's weight onto Meredith's shoulder.

The Guardian was heavier than she would have guessed. He was practically asleep, dead weight against her. Matt gave her a brief, distracted smile, then slid through the crowd and was gone.

"All right there, Andrés?" Meredith asked, nudging him into an easier position and slipping her arm around him. "What does Matt think he's doing, taking off *now*?"

She wasn't really expecting an answer, but Andrés smiled at her. "Matt has been wrestling with his conscience," he murmured. "He's between a rock and a hard place, as I think the expression goes ..."

Meredith tightened her grip on him. "What do you mean?" But the Guardian only hummed softly, his gaze foggy with exhaustion. His thick black lashes fluttered against the shadows beneath his eyes.

They were ready to move Trinity now, the werewolves carrying her carefully, Jack and Stefan keeping pace beside her makeshift stretcher. Jack was holding Trinity's hand. As they left, he cast a swift glance over the room. "Can you take care of this place?" he asked Darlene.

Meredith looked around the room at the floor coated with blood and gore, the windows shattered, Solomon's body in pieces, vampire corpses scattered through the hallways. Water was running in long dirty stains through the bloody wallpaper. Andrés's magic vines, wilting, ran across the floor. Even the suckling pig had smashed. There was no way they could leave the museum this way for innocent curators to find in the morning.

"What does he mean, take care of it?" she asked Darlene.

The older woman smiled grimly, the flamethrower hanging from her hand. "He means burn it to the ground," she said. "Want to help me find some gasoline?"

#TVD11SaveTrinity



Trinity moaned and thrashed her head against the pillow, trying to pull away. Beneath her eyelids, her eyes moved rapidly. She was still trying to fight.

“You’re safe now,” Elena murmured, trying to soothe her. “We’ve got you.” She stroked Trinity’s hair carefully back from her forehead, and the girl stilled a little, whimpering. She was terribly pale. “It’s taking her a long time to heal,” Elena said nervously, looking up at Stefan.

“I know.” Stefan ran his fingers unconsciously across the wrist he had fed Trinity from. “But giving her any more blood isn’t safe. She’d rather die than be a vampire; any hunter would.”

Elena’s breath caught in her throat. Stefan thought that Trinity—funny, sweet-tempered Trinity, who had sparred with her and sympathized over Sammy’s death—was dying. Elena didn’t want to believe it, but Trinity looked so small and helpless lying there, trapped in her unconscious fight.

Jack nodded, his eyes fixed on his young teammate. His hair and clothes were spattered with blood and his face was exhausted, but he hadn’t left Trinity’s side. “All we can do now is watch over her,” he said softly. “At least we killed Solomon.”

Stefan nodded. “It was all thanks to Andrés,” he said. “Without him, we never could have gotten free.”

Andrés was slumped in a chair in the corner of the bedroom, completely asleep. Elena could sympathize. It sounded like he had channeled so much Power that he had burned himself out temporarily.

“Everyone fought hard,” Meredith said with a brief smile, dried blood cracking on her face. “And we won.”

Solomon was dead, Elena reminded herself. With all the worry over

Trinity, she hadn't really let it sink in. It didn't feel like they'd won.

Glimpsing her own reflection in the window, she saw a pale, large-eyed girl, one who looked like the *victim* in a dark fairy tale, not the happy princess. She was edgy and anxious, as if there was some kind of doom hanging over her head. As if there was something terrible still out there in the dark.

Stefan had told Elena that Solomon was the same man who brushed past her outside the bar a while ago, with the yellow-green eyes. She shivered at the thought that he had touched her, and realized how close she could have been to death at that moment. *I'm being ridiculous*, she told herself. *Everything will be all right, as long as Trinity survives.*

Trinity shifted in the bed and gave a soft whimper, and Elena forced her attention back to the wounded girl.

The apartment was full, but it was very quiet, just the shuffle of feet in the hall as everyone—hunters, werewolves, Elena's friends—stopped by, one after another, to gaze in at Trinity as she struggled for life. They were all injured in varying degrees, with limps, bruises, and cuts, but no one was hurt as badly as Trinity. Her hair spread out over the pillow, and her lashes were dark against the pallor of her face. She was breathing slowly and shallowly. Elena realized that she was breathing in time with Trinity, trying to make her friend's breath get stronger by sheer force of will.

But there was one person she hadn't seen. "Where's Matt?" she asked Meredith.

"He said he had something to do," Meredith reassured her. "I'm sure he'll be here soon."

Elena nodded. Tension still hung over her, over all of them. Trinity was balanced between life and death now, they all knew it, and the only thing they could do was to wait.



Matt scrubbed fiercely at the blood on his face with a wet wipe he'd found in the glove compartment of his car. He met his own gaze in the rearview mirror, confused and desperate, and looked away in frustration.

If he went into the hospital with blood on his shirt and in his hair, they'd either arrest him or try to operate on him.

Maybe there was something in his trunk. Hunching his shoulders so that no one in the hospital parking lot would realize he was covered in blood, he unearthed a dirty gray hoodie and pulled it over his head.

The emergency room was lit so brightly lit that it hurt his eyes for a moment. He staggered, blinking his eyes rapidly to adjust, and looked around. Before he could make it to the nurse behind the desk, Jasmine's voice spoke behind him. "Matt? What's going on?"

He turned to see her standing there, crisp and competent in her white coat, the complete opposite of everything he felt right now. When she saw his face, her eyes widened and she pulled him to the side of the room. "What is it?" she asked urgently. "What's happened?"

Matt licked his lips nervously. On the ride over, all he'd been able to think was: *Get Jasmine. She can help Trinity. You need Jasmine.* And she could help; he knew she could. But he didn't know what to say now.

"Please," he managed, his voice cracking. "Please, we have to hurry."

Jasmine frowned and glanced toward the admitting desk, and Matt angled himself to block her view. "No," he said. "We can't do this here. There'll be too many questions. You have to come with me now."

"Take a breath and tell me what's going on," Jasmine said calmly. Then she got a good look at him, and her eyes widened. "You have blood on your face." She reached out to touch him, clearly worried. "Where are you hurt?"

"It's not mine." Matt took a deep breath, feeling as if he was flinging himself off a high cliff over dark water. If he did this, there was no going back. But he had to. Trinity's life was at stake. "Please, trust me. I'll explain on the way. Vampires are real. Magic is real. A friend is hurt, and we can't bring her here."

Jasmine's eyes flew toward the admitting desk again, and the security guard beside it. "*Please*," Matt said desperately. "I need your help."

He gazed pleadingly at Jasmine and reached for her hand, trying to throw all the love he felt for her into one look, trying to remind her of how she trusted him. It was a lot to ask. But even if she thought he was having a psychotic break, he didn't mind, as long as he could get her to come help Trinity. She needed a *doctor*.

Jasmine looked doubtfully between him and the security guard, then finally sighed, her eyes softening. "I'll tell my supervisor I have to leave for personal reasons, and I'll come," she said. "But afterward, Matt, if I ask you to come back to the hospital with me, you're coming."

Matt pulled her into a hug, clinging to her, breathing in the scent of her, the normality and sanity she meant to him. "I'll wait for you out front," he said. "Bring a medical kit if you can. And please hurry."

Nothing was killing these vampires.

Damon grabbed one by the neck and sank a stake into his heart. His opponent fell, but instead of dying like he should have, he simply pulled the stake out of his chest, scrambled back to his feet, and lunged toward Damon again. *What the—?* Before the strange vampire could get close enough, Katherine grabbed him from behind and snapped his neck.

The vampire fell like a stone, but by now Damon knew that was only temporary. Breaking their necks kept these vampires down for longer than anything else they'd tried, but it wasn't permanent. Damon knew from experience that they had about half an hour before that vampire would be up and fighting again.

He glared down at the circle of temporarily incapacitated vampires around him. "What the *hell?*" he growled, kicking at one of them. "Stakes don't kill them, breaking their necks doesn't kill them, it's impossible to pull their heads off or their hearts out, they can walk in the daylight, and apparently they're not affected by holy ground." He gestured around at the baroque-style Russian Orthodox church they were standing in. Some older vampires still refused to go on holy ground, and it had been worth trying. "How are we supposed to kill them?"

"We'll find something," Katherine said grimly. "Let's search the bodies while they're out." She looked tired, Damon thought, her beautiful lapis lazuli eyes sunken and a slight grayish pallor to her skin. She wasn't getting enough to eat, he knew, and she was still letting him feed from her.

Damon used the toe of his extremely expensive—but now, to his dismay, badly scuffed—boot to flip over the vampire closest to him, an East Asian man with short dark hair. "Nothing worthwhile here," he said, going through the fallen vampire's pockets. "A few coins."

“This one’s pockets are empty,” Katherine reported, bending over another at the other end of the room.

“This one looks like a peasant.” Damon glared haughtily down at the next unconscious vampire, who was dressed in ripped jeans and a stained T-shirt. “Terrible taste in clothes.” Starving and running for his life made him more irritable than usual.

“We were more discerning when we turned people in the old days.” Katherine sniffed. “You and Stefan were the only ones I made for centuries.”

“You made up for it these last few years, though, didn’t you?” Damon asked absently. Was there something in the peasant’s pocket? His fingers closed on a narrow rectangle of cardboard, and he pulled it out. A business card. There was no phone number or address or any information at all, really. Just a company name—Lifetime Solutions—and a stylized black-and-white figure eight. “An infinity symbol?” he asked aloud. “Katherine, this—”

As he looked up, there was a sudden flurry of movement, and Katherine made a high, choking sound, her eyes startled wide open. There was a wooden stake buried in her chest.

One of the vampires who should have still been unconscious had risen up behind her, utterly silent, and attacked Katherine from behind. Katherine stared at Damon for one long moment, her lips parted in surprise. And then she fell.

Horried, Damon flew across the room quickly enough to catch her before she hit the floor. Cradling Katherine carefully in the crook of one arm, he snapped the other vampire’s neck again before it could stake him, too. The strange vampire hit the floor with a thud as Damon turned his full attention to Katherine.

“No, darling, stay with me,” he begged, the shock hitting him. He pulled the stake from her chest, but he could tell already that it was too late. Her beautiful blue eyes were glazing over as he watched. Time seemed to stretch out as Damon thought of the long roads they’d traveled together, him and Katherine. From his days as a human, when he’d loved her with all his heart, to now, when they had become companions, even friends. Sharp, spiteful, sometimes charming, never boring. His Katherine.

“Damon,” she breathed, just a whisper of sound. His chest tight with sorrow, Damon watched as the life in Katherine’s eyes faded, and she went heavy and still in his arms.

He held her close for a moment, then slowly lowered her to the ground, stroking her cheek in silent apology. His eyes felt hot. He’d loved Katherine,

and then he'd hated her. He'd died and killed for her, and he'd watched her die once before. Lately, she'd been his friend. His mind kept coming back to that. He didn't have many friends. He never had. "I'm sorry, Katherine," he whispered to her.

He kneeled, gazing down at her body, which looked painfully small and still on the floor of the church. She'd always loomed so large to him, his maker, his first love. "They'll pay for this," he swore solemnly. "I'll find a way to kill them. I promise."

One of the vampires on the floor stirred, and Damon slammed the stake in his hand through its chest. It wouldn't kill the vampire, Damon knew that, but it would keep him down a few minutes longer. They were recovering faster than they had the first few times he and Katherine had fought them. Wasn't *that* a wonderful thing to realize, he thought bitterly, now that he was alone.

Alone. Damon thought briefly of his brother, and anger whipped through him. Damon had asked Stefan to come. If he had been there, they wouldn't have been quite so outnumbered, and maybe Katherine wouldn't have died.

It was time to go. Damon got to his feet and scooped Katherine up in his arms, cupping her head carefully with one hand to hold it against his shoulder, her hair soft under his fingers. She was as light as she'd been the first day he'd met her, when he had lifted her down from her father's carriage. She'd looked shyly at him through dark lashes, and his human heart had sped up, filled with emotions he'd barely understood. They'd been such children then.

He was going to take these strange, almost unkillable vampires down, no matter what. As Damon pushed his way through the front double doors, his footsteps echoing in the vast empty space of the church, he felt for the business card in his pocket. Lifetime Solutions. It was as good a place as any to start.

#TVD11FarewellKatherine

* * *

On the apartment's balcony, Stefan closed his eyes for a moment. It was almost morning, and he was tired. Solomon was dead now, and Elena was safe. He wondered how long it would take for that to really hit him, for the gaping pit of anxiety he'd been carrying inside to heal.

A cool dawn breeze brushed his cheek, and just for a moment, it felt almost like a hand. It carried a fresh scent with it, the smell of damask roses. Stefan frowned.

Back at the beginning, when he'd been alive, Katherine had smelled like that. She used to bathe in rose water. It had been a long time since he'd

smelled that scent—it wasn't the kind of perfume modern women wore.

Good-bye, Stefan. He didn't know if he really heard the words, but suddenly they were there in his mind. Katherine's voice. In a flash he knew what had happened, and his chest tightened with sorrow. Katherine was dead. She'd been his enemy those last times he'd seen her, but once upon a time he'd loved her.

He pushed the thought away. *I'm just tired and morbid*, he told himself, but something in him felt that it was true. He needed to call Damon to make sure he was okay.

Entering the living room from the balcony, Stefan almost ran into Jasmine, who flinched backward. "Sorry, oh, I'm sorry," she said, breathlessly.

Stefan stepped deliberately away from her, his hands held up in what he hoped was a nonthreatening gesture. "No, excuse me," he said. Earlier, Matt had made Stefan show Jasmine his fangs and his speed to convince her that he was a vampire, and she'd coped with it all surprisingly well. Matt followed Jasmine in from the bedroom and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

Elena, Jack, and Meredith, who had been talking quietly on the sofa, jumped to their feet at Jasmine's arrival.

"How is she?" Elena asked.

Jasmine smiled wearily. "Trinity's stable," she said. "I set her up with some saline to keep her from getting dehydrated, and the tranexamic acid helped with the bleeding. I'm going to leave some antibiotics with you that she should take twice a day for the next week and a half, but I think she'll be fine." Her eyes fluttered hesitantly back to Stefan. "The—what you gave her, the blood, really helped her heal. I don't think she would be alive without it."

Jack clapped Stefan on the shoulder, and Elena threw her arms around Jasmine. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you so much." Matt grinned and hugged Jasmine, too, and then Meredith piled on, all four of them laughing now, loose with relief.

Stefan smiled, keeping his distance, but a great wave of gratitude washed over him. If Trinity lived, if she recovered, then they would have come through this amazingly unscathed.

After a little more talk, all of them promising to help with Trinity's care, make sure she stayed in bed and took all her medications, Matt and Jasmine headed for the door. "Jasmine's working the emergency room again tomorrow," Matt said. "She'd better catch all the sleep she can. Meredith, do

you want a ride?”

Meredith nodded. “Just let me grab my stuff,” she said. “It’s in the bedroom.” She put a finger to her lips. “I won’t wake her, I promise. Hunters can be as quiet as cats.”

Jasmine rested her head on Matt’s shoulder as they waited. Jack headed for the kitchen. “I’m going to tell the others,” he threw back over his shoulder.

Alone for a moment, Stefan took the opportunity to pull Elena aside, to tell her about the strange moment out on the balcony. “When I was outside—” he began.

But before he could continue, feet pounded down the hall and Meredith burst back into the living room, her olive skin unnaturally pale. “Trinity’s gone!”

“We’ll find her. We will find her,” Matt said, pushing his foot down on the accelerator. He wasn’t sure whom he was trying to convince, Jasmine or himself, but even he could hear the uncertainty in his voice. How could anyone have gotten to Trinity? She’d only been unattended for a couple of minutes at most. There’d been no sign of violence in the room, just the covers pushed back, the saline drip making a wet patch on the empty bed.

“I can’t understand how she could have walked away,” Jasmine shivered. “She was so sick. She just kept staring at me with those yellow eyes while I gave her the injections. I doubt she even saw me.”

“I don’t think she left on her own,” Matt said tightly. The sun was just coming over the horizon, dazzling him, and he squinted hard at the road ahead. Then the other part of what Jasmine had said registered, and his hands jerked on the wheel.

“Careful!” Jasmine yelled, and Matt swerved back into his own lane, his heart pounding.

“What do you mean, yellow eyes?” he asked. “Trinity has blue eyes; I’m sure of it.”

Shaking her head, Jasmine wrapped her arms around herself. “This is all too weird,” she muttered, and fell into silence for the rest of the ride home.

When they got to Jasmine’s building, Matt parked and walked Jasmine to her door. She turned to him, her key in her hand, and his heart sank. There was something unfamiliar in her face: a look of fear and doubt. *I did this. I wanted to keep all this from her so she’d never have to look like that.*

“Trinity will be all right,” he said, babbling, desperate to take that look away. “We’ll find her tomorrow; everything will be fine. She can’t have gone far. And, you know, she’ll be all right because *you* saved her. I can’t—I’m so grateful to you, I can’t tell you how much—”

But Jasmine was shaking her head back and forth in denial, a strong *no no*. “Matt—” she said.

“I love you,” Matt said quickly, talking over her. “It’s not always like this, I promise. And we can teach you to protect yourself.” Matt reached out a hand, trying to reassure her, but her arms were crossed over her chest.

That was the wrong thing to say; he knew it as he said it. Jasmine’s lips twisted into a wry smile. “That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

Matt’s vision blurred. “I love you,” he said again, hearing the flat note of despair in his voice. He always lost everything. Everyone.

Jasmine’s eyes were shining with tears. She uncrossed her arms and reached out to take Matt’s hand. “I love you, too, Matt,” she said, steadily. “But this is too dangerous, for both of us.” She frowned. “Maybe I can finish my residency somewhere else. We could start fresh.”

Matt stepped back. “I can’t just *leave*,” he said. “These are my friends. We have to find Trinity and figure out—” He broke off. Jasmine’s face was miserable with longing, but her mouth was a firm line.

“I know,” she said, her fingers tightening on his as if she couldn’t bear to let him pull away. “You’re so loyal. I love that about you.”

“So ... is this the end?” he asked her, dreading what she would say next. He felt like he was drying up inside, withering.

“I think it has to be,” Jasmine whispered. Tears were running down her cheeks, and she let go of his hand again to swipe at them, sniffing.

Part of Matt wasn’t surprised. All this time, he’d known that it would come down to this—his friends, or Jasmine. He couldn’t have both. Love didn’t work out for him. He ducked his head down, stared at his grimy sneakers. “I don’t want to lose you,” he said softly, “but I can’t change who I am.”

There was a choked-off sob from Jasmine, and then her lips brushed lightly over his cheek. He didn’t look up, just kept his eyes fixed on the tattered shoelaces on his right shoe, the rip in the side. Then she was gone, the door of her building slamming behind her.

Matt touched the spot where Jasmine had kissed him, holding onto this, the last kiss she would give him. The sun had risen over the horizon now, and everything seemed hard and cold and bright.

He turned and walked back to the car alone, the wind whipping against his cheeks where he could still feel Jasmine’s kiss.

The motel room Trinity had been sharing with Darlene didn't seem to hold any immediate clues. It was small and sort of grimy: There was barely enough room for all of them to fit inside. Jack and Darlene were rifling through Trinity's possessions while Stefan and Elena searched the furniture for anything hidden. Zander and Shay were mostly hanging around the kitchenette, doubtlessly searching for scent clues, and Meredith herself was examining Trinity's weapon collection.

The others were mostly out patrolling the town and the woods, the Pack's sharp noses trying to root out any scent that might lead them to Trinity. Matt hadn't shown up yet. He was probably on his way from Jasmine's now.

This is what it's like to be a traveling hunter, Meredith thought, looking around. She and Stefan had traveled in search of Old Ones, of course, but only for a few days at a time. This room was different. Everything in it, from the hard-wearing, neutral-colored clothes to the neatly kept weapons, could be packed quickly and easily into one duffle bag. These were the possessions of a girl constantly on the road.

Meredith reached into the weapons bag and ran her thumb over the handle of Trinity's spare machete. The grip was worn with use.

"I don't think she's been back," Darlene said, rifling carefully through a bureau drawer. Her face was creased with concern. "All of her clothes are here."

"These papers just have to do with the hunt," Jack said from the desk. "Nothing I don't have. Would she have gone back to her family, do you think? Maybe if she was confused from the blood loss?"

Darlene shook her head, her eyes fixed on Trinity's meager possessions. "Her parents were killed in a vampire attack a couple of years back. There's no one else."

Stefan's hands paused for a moment in their careful examination of the space below Trinity's mattress, where he was feeling for anything hidden. It was the tiniest flinch, but Meredith saw it. She knew how much human deaths at the hands of other vampires bothered him, even now that he'd killed so many monsters, saved all of their lives so many times. Stefan, she thought, had never forgiven himself for what he was.

Elena laid a comforting hand on Stefan's shoulder and said idly to Jack, "I thought you'd all known one another all your lives."

"Not Jack," Darlene told her. "He recruited us for this hunt out of Atlanta about a year ago. We've been after Solomon ever since."

"We're all from hunter families, though," Jack said, "and that's a bond that crosses state lines." He grinned at Meredith, and something warm expanded in her chest at the acceptance in his eyes: She and Jack and Darlene, they were all hunters.

She stood and zipped Trinity's weapons bag back up. It didn't hold any clues. "If only Bonnie were here. She does a great tracing spell. I'll have Alaric call her, and she can talk him through it."

Stefan nodded. "That's probably our best option."

Darlene closed the bureau drawer. "Guess we should go," she said, but she hesitated, looking around the room one more time. Her face was tight with anxiety. "I just don't know where she could have gone," she said softly.

Zander cleared his throat. He and Shay were hovering in the kitchenette, and something in the way they were standing made the hairs suddenly stand up on the backs of Meredith's arms.

"Are we sure Solomon's dead?" Zander asked, sounding reluctant, rocking back on his heels.

Stefan and Meredith glanced at each other.

"We all saw him die," Meredith said, puzzled. "You saw, too. Stefan cut him in *half*."

"Wait, do you *smell* him?" Elena asked, horrified. One of her hands pulled back in front of her chest, as if to stave off a blow. "You said all the scents in here were old," she protested.

Shay shrugged. "In here, yeah."

Zander shifted from one foot to the other, looking uncomfortable and anxious. "The smells in here are old," he said, "but back at your apartment, Trinity didn't smell right. It's kind of hard to explain. Like, her scent and

Solomon's scents were all wrapped up together. I didn't worry about it then, because we were all just focused on how hurt she was, but now ..."

He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, and Meredith suppressed a little flare of annoyance. Bonnie usually acted as a Zander translator for the rest of her friends. Meredith hadn't really noticed until Bonnie went away that the guy wasn't the best at communication.

"Of course Trinity smelled like Solomon," Meredith said, trying to sound patient. "He was touching her at the Plantation Museum. And when Stefan killed him, his blood went all over her."

"Not like that," Zander said, frowning. "His scent wasn't on top of hers; they were all mixed up together. That's not how it works." He looked at Shay and she gave him a little shrug, as if to say, *this is your thing, not mine*. Turning to Stefan, he said, "Is there any way he could have infected Trinity with something? Like, with some aspect of himself? Can Old Ones do that?"

Say no. Meredith looked at Stefan for reassurance, but he frowned, unsure. "The Old Ones have so many Powers that other vampires don't," he said slowly. "I never heard of anything like that, but it could be true."

Jack shook his head decidedly. "I've been hunting Old Ones for a while—longer than you, Stefan, no offense. None of them could do that."

A flicker of movement outside the window caught Meredith's eye. "Matt's here," she said. She opened the door, and Matt came in, red-eyed and unshaven.

"Are you okay?" Meredith asked. They were all tired and worried, but Matt looked even worse than the rest of them, shockingly pale and grim under his stubble, his face almost paper white.

"Fine," Matt said, but he sounded distracted. He looked at Stefan. "Listen, Jasmine said Trinity's eyes were yellow when she was treating her. I don't ... what do you think that means?"

Goose bumps crawled up Meredith's skin. "Possession?" she said, her voice sounding strangely high to her own ears. "With the eyes, and the scent? Even though Solomon's dead?"

Stefan frowned. "He was doing *something* to Trinity before we managed to kill him. And the way he went around to all of us in the room, like he was testing us. It could have been a spell, some kind of blood ritual."

Jack stood. The way he pulled his shoulders back, his weight evenly balanced between his feet, reminded Meredith of how he'd looked when they were sparring. But the enemy wasn't here to fight. "What are you trying to

suggest?" he asked.

Elena swallowed. "He's saying that when Solomon was in danger, he might have ... moved into Trinity's body."

"If that were true," Stefan said, thinking aloud, "if he's really possessing Trinity right now, then all we've done is make him angrier. Make him want revenge." Stefan's eyes were fixed on Elena, and Meredith knew whom he was most worried about.

Elena's own mouth, however, had dropped open the moment Stefan said *revenge*. She looked around the circle of faces, her eyes wide with terror. "Where's *Andrés*?"

* * *

On the porch of James's old house, Elena dug in her purse for her keys.

"I didn't know you guys kept this house," Spencer said cheerfully. "Sweet." Zander had sent the younger werewolf along with Elena, Stefan, and Meredith while the rest of the Pack searched the woods, but Spencer seemed pretty casual about it. He'd always been sort of a preppy frat-boy type, perpetually tan, collar popped. He wasn't Elena's favorite werewolf.

"James left it to Andrés in his will," she explained tightly, finally unearthing the keys. "It comes in handy for Guardian business." In this case, "Guardian business" mostly meant that Andrés had a place to stay when he visited Dalcrest, as did Aunt Judith and Elena's little sister, Margaret.

Elena thought fondly for a moment of James. He'd been her professor at Dalcrest and had helped her ease into her life as a Guardian. She owed him so much.

But she couldn't help remembering, too, that this house was also the place where James had died. As Elena turned the key she tried to convince herself that her feeling of dread was misguided. Andrés had probably just overslept after everything that had happened last night.

The door swung open with a bang, and a rush of icy air chilled them. Spencer's and Stefan's heads shot up, both of them instantly on alert. It was as if they heard—or, God, *smelled*—something none of the humans could.

"Stay here, Elena," Stefan said, but she shook her head and moved forward with the others.

They found Andrés in the bedroom.

He was lying sprawled out across the flowered comforter, blood flooding the bed from the wide gashes in his torso. His face, however, was curiously untouched. His dark eyes stared into the distance, their long black lashes

framing only blankness, and his mouth hung slack. One hand dangled off the bed, fingers pointing down. A trail of blood still ran sluggishly over his wrist and hand, dripping slowly onto the floor.

Elena buckled when she saw him, almost falling, but Meredith grabbed her and held her up. *Oh God oh God*. He'd been ripped apart, just like Sammy.

All around them sounded the steady drip of water as the ice on the windows and mirrors began to melt.

"Solomon was here," Stefan said. "We were right; he's not dead." His voice sounded almost dry and matter-of-fact, but Elena could hear the devastation underneath. They had all thought they were safe.

Elena stepped forward slowly, a sob escaping her throat. Meredith tried to hold her back, but she shook off her friend's grip. When she reached Andrés, she stood still and looked at him, trying to look past the gore to see her friend one last time.

Tentatively, she reached out to touch his hand, ignoring the sticky, lukewarm blood that coated it. Andrés's hands had always been in motion, graceful and expressive, reaching out to embrace the world. She remembered the day they'd met, when he had taken her hand in his, warm and strong and reassuring. They sat under a tree together, and he told her the truth about being a Guardian, and she had been less afraid.

Behind her, the others were murmuring together. Spencer had pulled out his phone and was calling someone, probably Zander. They were all tense and eager to hunt, she knew, but Elena wasn't ready to join them.

Andrés's eyes were dull now. They'd always been so bright. He'd been in love, for the first time, and somehow that seemed worse than anything, that he'd died here, thousands of miles away from his love.

Elena brushed her hand lightly over her friend's face, closing his eyes. "Good-bye, Andrés," she said quietly. It seemed so important to be gentle with him now, even though he wasn't really here anymore. "I'm so sorry."

#TVD11SolomonLives



“Damon, there’s something *wrong* with you. I know it. I can feel it through our bond.” Damon listened as Elena took a ragged breath, sounding tearful. “Are you okay?”

“Damon, please call me. I’m worried about you.”

“Damon, I don’t even know if you’re getting these messages. If you are, call me. Please.”

Clicking “delete” on the last of the many messages from Elena that had filled up his voice mail, Damon leaned back to rest against one of the small peaked roofs of the Musée d’Orsay. A stiff night breeze lifted his hair, and he huddled into the collar of his jacket. Normally the cold wouldn’t bother him at all, but he hadn’t fed since Katherine died, and he was starting to feel it.

This was a good spot to rest. He hadn’t yet seen any of the vampires that were chasing him shape-shift or fly, so for whatever reason, they must not be able to. And from here Damon had a fine view over the rooftops of Paris, the river Seine at his back. There would be plenty of warning if anyone came after him. Finally, a moment to catch his breath and listen to his messages.

Elena liked Paris, he remembered; she had visited when she was a schoolgirl. Maybe she’d even been to the Musée. He remembered when this building had been a train station, modern in every detail at the beginning of the twentieth century: elevators, underground tracks, and above, a great sunlight-flooded space. It had seemed impossibly new to Damon at the time.

He shook his head, dismissing the memory. He’d been feeling melancholy and sentimental lately, ever since he’d said good-bye to poor Katherine’s empty body, leaving it buried in a churchyard—the least he could do for her. He was angry, and tired of running, and most of all, he was *hungry*.

But not lonely. He was never lonely, Damon reminded himself. Vampires

weren't meant to travel in packs. Still, it would be nice to hear Elena's voice again.

When he called, she picked up immediately. "Damon? Are you okay?" Her voice was thick with tears, and he stiffened automatically.

"What's wrong, princess?" he asked, peering over the side of the museum. Was that a vampire far below, moving purposefully toward him? He sent his Power questing, found nothing. Sometimes they seemed to turn up out of nowhere, and he wasn't good at sensing this new kind of vampire at all.

"Andrés is dead," Elena told him, her voice cracking. "We think ... the Old One we thought Stefan and Andrés killed, he's not dead after all. And he murdered Andrés." She gave a desolate little sob that went straight to Damon's heart.

"Oh, Elena," Damon said softly. "I'm sorry. I know you cared for him." The Guardian had been a friend to Elena, and, for that, Damon found it in himself to feel sorry he was gone.

Wait a minute. The Old One had been strong enough to trick Stefan and murder a Guardian?

Damn Stefan, anyway. He had told Damon that everything was fine.

"Stefan couldn't kill the Old One?" he asked, his eyes fixed on the walkway below. There were definitely more figures gathering there.

"It wasn't Stefan's fault," Elena argued. Damon sighed. Elena would always defend Stefan.

"But that doesn't mean it's okay," he said. "Stefan thought he was in control, and he wasn't. He told me you'd be fine."

Damon got to his feet, keeping a careful eye on the little knot of people—or vampires?—far below. Straightening his jacket, he realized his hands were shaking slightly. It was so *typical* of Stefan. He wasn't as careful as he thought he was.

"Nothing's ever Stefan's fault, is it?" he went on, surprised at the bitterness in his own voice. "I asked him to come out here to help us, and he said *no*. And now Katherine's dead. He said he would protect you, you and all your little human friends out there wallowing in small-town America, and now they're dying."

Elena sucked in a short, horrified breath. "Katherine's dead?" she asked.

"Yes," Damon said. He could hear Elena starting to cry again. Belatedly, he tried to soften his tone. Katherine and Elena, he had forgotten they had

their own tie. “We just ... weren’t enough to fight what’s after us, not this time. I asked Stefan to help, but he wouldn’t come. I’ll kill them, though, I promise you that.”

“I had no idea,” Elena said bleakly. “I’m so sorry, Damon. I know how much she meant to you.”

For a moment, Damon was surprised that Elena knew how he’d felt about Katherine, when he’d only just figured it out himself. But of course Elena knew; she could feel everything he felt. He pressed his fist against his chest, letting the ache of sorrow pass between them.

“She and Stefan were the only ones left,” he said. “The only ones who knew who I used to be. Now there’s only Stefan.”

Elena sighed softly through the phone, thousands of miles away, and Damon felt her sympathy like a warm pulse in the bond between them.

The group down below was streaming into the museum. It was dark and silent inside; these were no tourists. Time to go. “Elena, I can’t talk,” he said, speaking quickly, slamming shut her link to his emotions. “I’ll call again soon.”

He clicked the phone off and tucked it into his pocket, ignoring her call of “*Damon!*” Closing his eyes, he searched for his Power and pulled it around him.

For a moment, he didn’t think he would be strong enough. He was so tired and hungry. He’d raced across most of Europe in the past few weeks, trying to get away from these nearly unkillable vampires, but they just kept coming. He could hear footsteps on the grand staircase of the museum, far below. Maybe Paris was as good a place as any to die one more time.

No. Fiercely, he dug deep in himself for more Power. He was *Damon Salvatore*. He was an aristocrat, a gentleman, a vampire. No one was going to bring *him* to his knees.

In his rage, he found what he needed. Long before his pursuers reached the roof of the museum, Damon had stretched his wings and flown into the darkness.

* * *

Elena couldn’t breathe. Andrés dead. Katherine dead. Trinity dead, or possessed—who knew how much of her was still in there?

Damon had asked Stefan to help him, and Stefan had said no. Why hadn’t he told her?

She was gripping her phone so tightly that its edges hurt her hand.

Carefully, she hit the off button and put it down. Then she went to find Stefan.

He was sharpening the machete, the long-bladed weapon propped carefully against his knee as he slid a file along it.

“I need some more blood from you for the weapons,” he said without looking up. “If Solomon’s still out there, we need to go after him.”

“Damon just called,” Elena told him. “Katherine’s dead.”

Stefan’s hand jerked, slicing a long cut on his arm with the machete, and he gave a small cry of pain. But his leaf-green eyes were unsurprised. “I know,” he said. “I’ve known since it happened.”

Elena found a cloth for him in the kitchen. “Here,” she said. “Put some pressure on it.” But the cut was already healing. Stefan just wiped the blood away and went back to sharpening the machete, his face closed off again.

“I thought—I felt something; I knew she was gone. How did she die?” he asked, his eyes on the blade. Elena knelt beside him and pressed her face against his shoulder, and he stopped sharpening the machete for a moment to rest his hand heavily against her hair.

“Damon didn’t have time to say. I think something is chasing him.” Elena drew back and watched Stefan keep moving the file steadily along the blade. Then she said, hesitantly, “He told me he asked you to come and help them. Days ago.”

Stefan nodded, still not meeting her eyes. “I couldn’t,” he explained. “We were hunting for Solomon. I had to keep you safe.”

“Stefan! Look at me.” Stefan’s head was still bowed, his gaze averted. Elena grabbed the handle of the machete and pulled it away from him. Stefan hissed in shock, yanking his hands back before it cut him again. Elena tossed the machete onto the floor.

“I am not that vulnerable,” she said hotly. “I’m a Guardian, and I have Power of my own.” Powerful and amazing, Trinity had called her. Elena knew she needed to remember that, to remember that she didn’t need to be protected.

Getting to his feet, Stefan stared at her, stricken. “Andrés was a Guardian,” he said. “And look what happened.”

“And we weren’t able to prevent it,” Elena said. She was tired of this, tired of Stefan treating her like she was more vulnerable than the rest of them. Yes, Andrés had died, and it was terrible and frightening. Any of them could die, not just Elena. “All I’m saying is that I can take care of myself sometimes. And when I can’t, there are people around me who can help.

Meredith. The other hunters. A whole Pack of werewolves. I'm not alone."

Stefan reached out and took Elena's hands, pressing them against his chest, above his heart. "I had to be here," he said. "I want to protect you."

"It's not just about me," Elena said. "When Damon called you for help, you should have gone. He's your brother, and he needed you."

Stefan's mouth twisted into a bitter parody of a smile, still clinging to her hands. "It's always Damon, isn't it?" he asked. "Even when he's thousands of miles away, he manages to come between us."

Elena stared at him, and then she pulled away. "This has nothing to do with Damon. This is about *us*. I'm not something to protect. I'm a protector. We need to work together, and we need to keep the big picture in mind. I'm not the only person in the world, Stefan."

"To me you are," Stefan said, and reached for her again. Elena shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. How had they gotten to this state?

The room blurred around her, and she wiped her eyes. "Maybe you should sleep out here tonight," she said, her heart aching. "I need some room to breathe."

#TVD11TroubleInParadise

Dear Diary,

Stefan said that, to him, I'm the only person in the world.

There was a time when I would have loved to hear that. But now, it just makes my blood run cold.

He's out on the balcony, staring into the night, watching for danger instead of curling up in here with his arms around me. Most of me wants to run out there and apologize. He'd lose that miserable look he has, and we'd hold each other, and everything would be back to normal. For the night.

But when we woke up, the problem wouldn't be gone.

Everyone Stefan has ever loved—including me, including Damon—has died, and left him.

It breaks my heart how much Stefan has suffered, how it's almost impossible for him to believe that terrible things aren't about to happen.

Of course it's scary that Solomon's still alive, and still hunting me. But I'm a Guardian, and I'm strong in my own way.

I ought to be protecting everyone. That's what I'm here for, after all.

I keep worrying about Damon. If he asked Stefan for help, he must have really needed it, and Stefan would have known that. What's changed, that Stefan thinks protecting me is the only thing that matters?

I love him. So much. And I've never regretted choosing to drink the Fountain of Eternal Youth and Life, so that I could be with Stefan,

forever.

I've never wondered if I made the right choice. Not until now.

"Looks quiet," Jack said, parking his van in front of the storage place. Row upon row of heavy metal sliding doors lined the walls of the huge concrete building, each marking a separate unit. "Our extra weapon stash is in row J. If Solomon's possessing Trinity and can access her memories, he might come here." He gave a half shrug as he unfastened his seat belt. "Worth a shot."

In the middle row of the van, Stefan closed his eyes wearily, just for a moment. He'd been dragging all morning, feeling like he was moving at half speed.

He was so tired. Elena's words still echoed in his mind: *I'm not the only person in the world, Stefan.*

To him, she was.

From her seat beside Stefan, Elena gave him a tiny, fragile smile. Stefan's chest ached a little at the peace offering. He smiled back, then, sighing, reached for the door handle. Tired or not, they needed to keep hunting Solomon.

"Wait a sec," Alaric said. "There's something you guys need to see." Leaning forward from the back row of seats, he handed Stefan a piece of paper. Zander craned his neck to get a better look, but Meredith, sitting between them, didn't react. She must have already known.

It was a computer printout of a "Missing" poster from the 1980s. Elena gave a sharp, high gasp when she saw it, and Stefan turned the paper so Jack and Darlene could see from the front as well. The photo was washed-out but recognizable: a young, sharp-featured man with tawny, shoulder-length hair, giving the camera an easy smile.

"That's Solomon," Zander said, cocking his head to one side. "Definitely. But the poster says Gabriel Dalton. I don't understand."

"When Meredith told me that you guys thought Solomon had possessed Trinity before he died, it didn't quite make sense," Alaric told them. "Possession doesn't work like that. If Solomon had his own corporeal body, the shock of it being destroyed would have jolted him right back out of Trinity. I thought something else might be going on, so ..." He spread his hands, his eyes on the smiling photo of Gabriel Dalton. "I did some research. I think Solomon body-swapped into Trinity's body from Gabriel Dalton's, pulled her spirit out, and put his own in. The body we saw wasn't his original form either."

“This is proof that Solomon’s done it before,” Meredith said. “The body Solomon was using was once someone else’s.”

“So who did we kill in Solomon’s—or, Gabriel’s, body?” Jack asked, looking grim. “This Gabriel Dalton? Trinity?”

Alaric spread his hands in a *who knows?* gesture. “I think Gabriel Dalton’s been dead for a while. Solomon wouldn’t leave any loose ends, and if someone believed they were Gabriel Dalton in another form, it would make things ... messier for him.”

Stefan felt ill. Abruptly, he reached again for the door handle and hurried out of the van. He felt the others startle behind him, then follow toward the hunters’ storage locker. *There’s nothing you can do about it now*, he told himself. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He’d thought killing Solomon was a triumph, but instead he’d murdered an innocent ally. He didn’t want to believe it, but it felt true.

Jack fell into step beside him.

“I killed Trinity,” Stefan said, defeated. Everything had happened so fast; he’d been so focused on killing Solomon, on ending all this.

“There’s no way you could have known,” Jack said roughly. “And Trinity was a good hunter; she knew the risks.” He twisted a ring on his finger with an angry, abrupt gesture. “The important thing is that we know what form Solomon’s in now. We should act quickly before he has time to swap into a body we *don’t* know.” He glanced back at Elena cautiously, then slowed to let her catch up. “Can you do that thing Andrés did? Channeling life force?”

Elena stopped dead and stared at him, aghast. “You mean *kill* her?” she asked angrily. “No. I won’t. There’s no proof that Trinity isn’t still in there. She could be possessed, helpless while her spirit is controlled by Solomon.” The others came up beside them, their faces worried.

A muscle at the side of Jack’s mouth twitched, and Stefan broke in. “What do you suggest we do, Elena?” he asked. “Alaric believes this is a case of body-swapping, and Solomon’s too powerful for us not to go after him with everything we have. If we hesitate, we put everyone in danger.”

Elena’s eyes narrowed. “By everyone, you mean me,” she said tartly. “But Trinity matters, too. We need to *capture* her, not kill her. We can’t kill her unless we’re completely sure she’s gone, that there’s no trace of her left in her body.”

His jaw clenching, Stefan glared back at her. For a moment, he felt like the world had narrowed to just the two of them. “You’re not the only one

threatened here,” he said, his voice tense. “Think of Andrés. We can’t risk everyone to save one person who is probably already dead.”

“Yes, we can,” Elena insisted. “We don’t sacrifice innocent people to keep ourselves safe. That’s not us, Stefan.”

They stared at each other, Elena flushed and breathing hard.

“If there’s a chance Trinity’s still in there ...” Darlene said slowly.

“She was a good hunter,” Jack said again. “Trinity would give anything if it meant we killed Solomon.”

There was a slight shifting in the room, as the group began to realize that there were two distinct sides, and they would all have to pick one. Jack agreed with him, Stefan knew: The risks of trying to capture Solomon without killing him were too high.

He’d fought with Elena before, over personal things, over Damon, but never over what the right course of action was. Looking at her outraged face, Stefan knew that if he ignored her, if he succeeded in killing Trinity, Elena might never forgive him. He could side with Elena, or he could keep her safe.

Either way, he might lose her forever.

Meredith's eyes watered, blurring the harsh white lights, and she tried to turn her face away. But she was stuck fast.

This was worse than being held by Solomon's Power. She could feel the multitude of tiny wires pressing against her skin, holding her in their trap. Heart pounding, she strained against them, trying desperately to move. But after a moment she gave up, letting her muscles go slack. It was only a dream, and soon she would wake up.

It just felt so *real*. The table—she was almost sure now that it was an operating table, and that thought started a cold dread in the pit of her stomach—was hard beneath her. Peering through the corners of her watering eyes, she could make out the blurry shape of something cylindrical and silver by her bedside. An oxygen canister, maybe? Was this a hospital?

The thought made her forget to be calm. She struggled harder, trying to wake herself up. Meredith had always hated hospitals.

As she pushed desperately against her restraints, a shrill beeping sped up, faster and faster. A heart rate monitor.

There was a shadow moving in the corner. Meredith stopped thrashing about and strained to see, the heart monitor slowing a little. There was no doubt about it this time. It was a person—shadowy, but getting closer.

With a sudden step, the figure moved to stand above her, anonymous in a surgical mask and white lab coat. Meredith blinked, trying to focus, but the person's face was still blurry. Something sharp and metallic flashed in the stranger's hand.

A scalpel, Meredith realized, heavy with dread, and tried to scrabble backward, to press herself into the hard table below her. She couldn't move. Her breath was coming in anxious, harsh pants. "No," she cried out, suddenly able to speak, hating the pleading, pathetic sound of her own voice.

The blade flashed silver along her stomach as Meredith watched, its motion followed by a thin, spreading line of red.

Something terrible was happening to her. Panic scratched at the inside of Meredith's head, a frantic babble. Something terrible was happening *now*.

#TVD11Nightmares

* * *

Meredith's eyes shot open. Dark room, soft bed, Alaric's steady breathing beside her. She felt at her stomach, reassuringly whole and unbloodied. She'd *known* it was a dream. But her heart was pounding hard, and her mouth was dry. Dream or not, she'd brought the fear with her: *Something terrible is going to happen*.

She got out of bed and padded into the kitchen, leaving the overhead light off. When she opened the refrigerator to pull out the water pitcher, she winced, blinking at the brightness. Her eyes were still sensitive from the harsh white lights. *No*, she reminded herself. *They're not. That was just a dream*.

Her throat was as dry and sore as if she'd really been screaming, though. Meredith gulped down the water and poured herself a second glass. It felt good going down, icily cold, but when she finished she was still parched.

There was something off about her, she thought. She felt jittery and overly sensitive, as if a touch might be too much to bear.

Swallowing against the ache in her throat, she squared her shoulders. *Be strong*. She was probably feeling weak because she'd been slacking off on her exercise schedule. Patrolling with Jack and his hunters was no substitute for a real workout.

A run clear would clear her head, Meredith decided.

A few minutes later, she left the house wearing a ratty old T-shirt and shorts, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. Starting with a slow, deliberate jog, she gradually sped up, her feet slapping a steady rhythm against the sidewalk. The sky was beginning to lighten with the promise of dawn, but she had a stake strapped to her waist, hidden by her shirt, just in case.

By the time she reached the Dalcrest campus, she was almost at a sprint. The faster she went, the more centered Meredith felt, resettling comfortably in her own body again as her muscles strained.

The sun was just creeping over the horizon, and the campus was almost deserted. Meredith ran right past the only two people in sight, a couple making out, hot and heavy, pushed up against the side of the library.

A few strides farther on, she stopped, the scene she'd just passed

replaying in her mind's eye. The way the girl had her face pressed into the man's throat, her arms holding him in place. The slump of the guy's shoulders.

Meredith swore and turned back, running as fast as she could, her hands fumbling to pull the stake from under her shirt.

It wasn't until the girl looked up, blood dripping down her chin, the ends of her hair sticky and matted, that Meredith realized it was Trinity.

"Hey there," she said, baring her teeth at Meredith. "I was hoping I'd run into *all* you hunters."

With a twist of horror, Meredith realized the guy Trinity held propped up was Roy, one of the hunter brothers. He flopped forward against her, his eyes closed and his head hanging limply. Meredith couldn't tell if he was breathing.

Her hands closed tighter over her stake, her heart pounding. If she could get close enough ... A stake wouldn't kill an Old One, if that was even what Trinity was now, but it might slow her down.

"Are you in there, Trinity?" she asked, watching the girl carefully. If only she'd glance away for a moment. If Meredith could somehow distract her, maybe she could get close enough.

Trinity's smile grew, but she said nothing, just stuck out the tip of her pink tongue to lick the blood off her lips. With an internal shudder, Meredith realized Trinity's eyes were yellow now, like an animal's. Like Gabriel Dalton's when he had Solomon inside him.

Taking a step closer, the stake firm in her grip, Meredith asked, "Do you know who you are?" She cocked her head toward Roy, limp and still, his head lolling against Trinity's collarbone. "Do you know who *he* is?"

Trinity laughed, a harsh, sudden noise completely unlike her usual soft chuckle. "All you hunters are tied so tightly to one another, aren't you? I wonder if you know as much as you think you do."

She glanced at Roy for a moment. "This one? He's a fighter, but he couldn't strike at someone he knew." Meredith was only half listening. With Trinity's attention distracted for that split second, she saw her chance.

Lunging forward, she stabbed the stake at Trinity's heart.

And was frozen in place.

If Meredith harbored any doubts that Solomon had invaded Trinity's body, they fell away now. It was like the Plantation Museum, like her

nightmares. Her muscles, which just a minute ago had been strong, running, were completely immobile.

“I’d kill you now, but it’s more fun to play,” Trinity—*Solomon*—said. “I’ll see you around, hunter.” She stepped away from the library without even glancing back at Roy, and he fell heavily to the ground, landing on the concrete with a sinister thud.

Without looking back, without hurrying at all, Trinity sauntered off, her boots clicking on the pavement. Meredith was powerless to do anything except watch her go.

When Trinity had turned the corner and was completely out of sight, the hold she had on Meredith broke.

Immediately Meredith raced after her, her heart pounding as she rounded the corner of the library and ran between the dorms behind it. But Trinity was gone. The campus spread out in front of her in the early morning light, peaceful and silent and completely empty.

Meredith went back to Roy. He was still lying where Trinity had dropped him, his tall, broad body looking small and broken.

Meredith turned him over gently and checked his pulse. Roy flopped over unresistingly, a dead weight, his throat torn and bloody. How had Solomon’s invasion of her body turned Trinity into a vampire? Meredith didn’t understand it, but the evidence was right here before her. Trinity was a vampire—and like all the Old Ones, one who had nothing to fear from daylight.

Poor Roy, Meredith thought. Had he been happy to find Trinity, before she turned on him? She placed her hands on his chest and began CPR, pushing in a steady rhythm, lowering her mouth to his to force oxygen into his lungs. Even though she was pretty sure it was pointless, she had to try.

When Stefan and Elena had argued earlier over Trinity’s fate, Meredith hadn’t known what to think. But now she knew Stefan was right.

Trinity hadn’t known who Roy was, hadn’t really remembered Meredith. They’d both just been hunters to her, targets Solomon had been aware of all along. The girl who had been their friend, who had hunted beside them, was gone.



“No matter what happens, we have to try to hang on to normal,” Elena said.

Matt nodded. Personally, this was the last thing he wanted to be doing. But it was typical Elena: When things were at their worst, she whistled in the dark. He just wished Elena’s way of whistling in the dark didn’t include making Matt try on shirts.

“That one looks nice,” she went on, giving him a friendly once-over. “I know Jasmine likes green.”

Matt stiffened. He hadn’t told anyone about what had happened with Jasmine yet. There was too much going on for him to feel like he could bring up his personal life, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to talk about it. “We broke up,” he said, his voice sounding just as rough and miserable as he felt.

“Oh, no,” Elena breathed. “What happened?” Then her face darkened as she answered the question for him. “It’s because she finally found out the truth about everything, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Matt said quietly. “She didn’t want all that to be part of her life.”

“I don’t blame her.” Elena grimaced. She bent her head and flicked distractedly through some more shirts. “It’s terrifying. Remember how you felt when you found out that all of this—vampires and hunters and scary monsters in the dark—is real?” She looked up at Matt questioningly. “If you could do it all again, go back to the way things were before, would you?”

Matt flinched. *We could start fresh*, he heard Jasmine saying again, remembering how wide and pleading her beautiful eyes had been, and how they’d darkened in disappointment.

“I could never leave you guys in danger,” he told Elena, and it was true.

Elena looked up at that. “I know you couldn’t,” she said, her mouth

curling into a sad smile. “But I worry about you sometimes.” She pulled two more shirts off the rack and shoved them into his hands. “Try on the blue one first and let me see.”

In the dressing room, Matt carefully buttoned the blue shirt and smoothed it down. *Elena doesn't need to worry about me*, he thought. But how could he ever turn his back on his friends? It went against everything he believed in.

“Gorgeous!” Elena said when he came out in the new shirt. Her voice was cheerful, but her smile looked pasted on, too wide and toothy.

“How about you and Stefan?” Matt asked cautiously. “Today, the two of you seemed ...” *Angry*. “... at odds.”

Elena's smile fell. “He and Jack are out there, trying to track down Trinity,” she said, her voice flat. “They asked if I could trace her aura, but I refused. Not unless they're going to try to save her before they kill Solomon.” She let out a long, frustrated breath. “Stefan just won't listen. He thinks he's protecting me, but I'm not helpless.”

“I know,” Matt said gently. “Even before you were a Guardian, you were pretty tough.” Elena rewarded him with a more genuine smile, and he went to change shirts again.

When he came out, she had a lock of her silky blond hair twisted around her finger, her face thoughtful. Pushing at the rack of shirts, she said, “Can't Stefan see there's more to the world than me?”

Matt couldn't help the bubble of laughter that rose up in his throat at that. “Sorry,” he said, in response to Elena's frown, “but when we were in high school, that's the *last* thing you would have said.”

Elena had the grace to chuckle a little at that. “I wasn't that bad,” she replied defensively.

“Well, *I* always liked you.” Matt shrugged. He had more than liked her—beautiful, selfish, determined Elena. He still liked her now, but somewhere along the way, he had finally given up on loving her.

“I've changed,” Elena said. “We all have. We grew up. I'm *proud* of who I am now.” She frowned, sticking her chin out stubbornly. “And I *cannot* let Jack and Stefan kill Trinity without even trying to save her.”

“I know, and I'll help if I can.” Matt hesitated, not sure whether to say the rest of what he was thinking, and Elena cocked an inquiring eyebrow. “Just ...” He didn't quite know which words to use. “Just don't give up on Stefan, okay? You love each other, and that's ... hard to lose. I don't like seeing you fight.” He thought again of Jasmine's eyes when she'd said good-bye, and his

chest felt hot and tight.

Something of this must have come through in his words, because Elena looked at him knowingly, terribly sad, her lips pressed together and a deep line between her eyebrows.

To make her smile again, he held up the blue shirt. “And I’m buying the shirt.”

He didn’t really need a new shirt, but it was worth it to see her face lighten. As he followed Elena to the checkout line, though, he couldn’t help the nagging worry that always lived at the back of his mind now, that had lived there for years.

The worst is still to come.

* * *

When Elena got back home, Stefan was digging through the hall closet. “I’m looking for my axe,” he explained, a bit awkwardly, not looking at her. “Have you seen it?”

Elena shook her head, and he shoved a bunch of coats aside. “Here we are,” he said, pulling it out and turning away. “I need to go. I’m late meeting Jack.”

“Stefan—” Elena reached out to stop him.

He turned back toward her, seeming reluctant. There was so much pain in his face, lines of strain around that perfect sensual mouth and hurt darkening his eyes, making Elena’s heart ache. All the way home, she had been thinking of what Matt said: *You love each other, and that’s hard to lose.*

“Stefan,” she said, helplessly. “I don’t want to hurt you. I *never*, ever want to hurt you. I love you so much.”

Stefan’s face softened and he stepped toward her. “I love you, too, Elena. Everything I do is for you.”

“I know that,” Elena said, her voice calm and even. She smiled at him and held out her hand, feeling like she was coaxing some small animal out of its hiding place. He took it, hesitantly, and she squeezed, her palm warm against his. “I’m sorry we argued. But I’m worried about you. I’m afraid wanting to protect me has kept you from seeing how someone as innocent as Trinity—the *real* Trinity—needs us to give her a chance.”

Stefan opened his mouth to object, and Elena pushed on quickly. “I worry that your morals are getting out of whack, Stefan, because you’re so worried about me that you’re not stopping to think. It’s what I’ve always admired most about you, your sense of right and wrong,” she finished softly, and rose

up to brush her mouth against his.

But Stefan pulled away. “I love you, too, Elena,” he said. He was frowning, his face hard with determination. “But we have to stop Solomon before he kills again. If that means losing Trinity, that’s the price we have to pay. If we had any proof, any sign at all that Trinity was still in there, I’d be with you on this. But all I see in there is Solomon.”

“We need to give her a chance,” Elena said, her voice rising. “It’s not fair. I know I don’t have any proof, but we aren’t *sure*. If there’s even a shred of a chance that Trinity’s trapped in there, we have to do everything we can to save her.” She’d tried to talk to Stefan with a cooler head, but here they were, right back where they’d started.

Stefan turned away and headed for the door, his axe swinging easily from his hand. “I’m sorry, Elena, but I can’t promise you that,” he said coldly over his shoulder. “I have to do what’s right, what’s best for everyone. Even if you can’t see it.” He closed the apartment door quietly behind him.

Elena stared after him, her heart aching. He shouldn’t have to shut himself off from her like that. She was losing Stefan—and he was losing himself.



“Ready?” Bonnie asked, reaching for Marilise and Rick. They each joined their free hands with Poppy’s, forming a circle of four.

Poppy blinked rapidly, clearly nervous, and Bonnie grinned at her reassuringly. They all could feel Alysia watching them from the other side of the roof and, behind her, the other groups with their mentors.

Bonnie swallowed and steeled herself, shutting out everything except her three friends and the cool stone of her falcon resting at the hollow of her throat. She used it to center herself, breathing deeply, and closed her eyes.

Her consciousness flickered along their joined hands, going around the circle, pulling on Marilise’s solidity, Poppy’s energy, Rick’s calm. To each of them, she said, silently, *Can I? Can I? Let me in*, and felt each reply a wordless yes. Their hands warmed in hers, and she waited.

And then Bonnie felt a little thrill along her spine as something slid into place between them, all their edges neatly fitting together. With a jolt, they were connected. Power began to pour into Bonnie from all three, filling her, making her gasp. She was a balloon, swelling with the others’ Power, stretched so thin it was almost too much for her to contain.

Bonnie opened her eyes—or rather, opened several pairs of eyes, each in a different place. She saw the faraway stars glowing faintly above the city from four different angles. She could see her own profile through their eyes, her head tilted backward, her cheeks round and soft. Bonnie felt like a live wire, thrumming with the energy of four people, burning and fizzing with it.

She took all this Power, her own and her three partners’, and gave it a direction. It roared fiercely through her and up toward that clouded, dim-starred city sky. Flooding through her body and expanding farther and farther out, the Power cleared away the clouds, brightening the stars.

Bonnie gasped for breath and kept pushing. Power pulsed steadily through her as she concentrated on summer back home, picnics down at Warm Springs when she was in high school, the sun hot on her back and the smell of fresh-cut grass underfoot. Mixed up with this were Poppy's memories of her days at summer camp, pounding along on horseback on a wooded trail; Rick's of a childhood creek, cold water splashing around his calves, sharp river pebbles underfoot and sticky humid heat wrapping around him like a blanket; and Marilise digging in her garden, fragrant plants and crumbling dirt under her hands.

All those summers combined into one. Bonnie felt it take shape—hot and long and glorious, a perfect summer—and then she *pushed* it into the night.

Slowly, a bright white light began to grow and grow on the rooftop, Bonnie at its center. A few querulous chirps sounded and then a growing cacophony of birdsong, as birds awoke and decided that they had somehow missed the dawn. Everywhere else, it was night, but here on the rooftop, surrounded by their joined Power, it was day.

Bonnie held the sun in place for a few minutes, locked into a circuit of their Power, which ran through her into the sky and back to them again. She *was* the circuit. She felt stronger and more flush with Power every moment. She could keep the false day going all night, she realized, until the real sun came up.

But then she pulled back, breaking the circuit. This was just a demonstration of what they'd learned; she didn't need to hold it all night. It was enough to know that she could. Power drained out of her, leaving her alone in her own head. She blinked as her vision reduced to one point of view, one set of eyes. The light faded slowly, and night fell again.

Bonnie let go of her friends' hands and snapped the connection between them, releasing their Power. Breathing hard, they smiled at one another.

There was a burst of applause and some murmurs of appreciation from the group behind them as they surged closer. Bonnie had almost forgotten about their audience. "Very nice, very nice indeed," an older, bearded man kept saying, nodding and patting them on the backs.

Alysia pulled Bonnie to the corner of the roof, grinning. "That was terrific!" she exclaimed. "I liked what you chose, the way you all pulled energy from a personal memory. It's much stronger that way. You're really good at this."

"Thanks," Bonnie said. "It felt ... it was great, I felt like I was all three of them, sort of. And myself, too." She was alone in her head now, but she could

still feel the echoes of them: Poppy's spirit, Rick's intentness, Marilise's warmth.

Alysia raised her hand and pushed one of Bonnie's wild curls out of her face. "I know you've been waiting to go home, and I think, now, you're ready," she said. "You've learned so much. Maybe it's time to use your Powers where they're really needed."

Happiness rose up inside Bonnie, making her feel almost weightless for a second. *Home!* Now she could really help with the trouble in Dalcrest, more than she ever had before. Now she could go back where she belonged. She'd get to be with the friends she loved as much as sisters, and with Zander, wonderful, clear-eyed, warmhearted Zander. She'd missed him with a constant low ache the whole time she'd been in Chicago.

Impulsively, she reached out and wrapped her arms around Alysia, pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you," she said, smiling so hard her cheeks hurt, "Thank you so much."



If she concentrated all of her Guardian Powers, Elena could just see the faintest wisps of darkness, like tendrils of smoke hanging in midair. Eyes narrowed, she followed the traces of the dark aura, moving carefully from one to the next as she trekked through the woods. Matt and Darlene were following her, the undergrowth crunching beneath their feet, but she couldn't risk looking back at them. If she took her attention off the trail of evil stretching out before her, it just might disappear.

"Are you sure she knows what she's doing?" she heard Darlene whisper loudly to Matt.

"Yes," Matt answered, defensive. "Remember what Andrés did? Elena's special."

To be completely honest, Elena *wasn't* entirely sure she knew what she was doing. Stefan, Jack, Alex, and Meredith—four experienced hunters, one of them a vampire—had headed out to hunt Trinity today, weapons in hand, earpieces on, aiming for a kill. Zander had his werewolves patrolling the town and the campus, keeping people safe. Alaric was at the university, researching more folklore about body-swapping and possession.

And then there was the renegade force: Elena, Matt, and Darlene, hoping to somehow bring Trinity in alive. They wanted to hold her safe until they could figure out how to reverse what had happened and put Trinity back in control of her own body.

Darlene had appeared on Elena's doorstep that morning and grabbed her

by the arm, her fingers as strong and tight as if they were made of iron. *Hunter's grip*, Elena had thought, trying to wriggle free. Meredith held tight like this.

"Jack told us you want to get Solomon out of Trinity," Darlene had said, fixing Elena with fierce dark eyes, something desperate in her tone. "I want to try, if you will. Trinity's like a little sister to me."

Of course Elena wanted to try. She remembered Trinity's laughing challenge to her on the roof at the apple orchard and felt a pang of sorrow—that sweet-natured girl was lost, and no one was going to help her. If there was even the slightest chance Trinity was still there, they had to try. *No matter what Stefan thinks, I need to do what's right*, she thought, trying to make herself strong and inflexible. She wasn't used to being on the opposite side of an argument from Stefan.

So now here they were, just Elena, Darlene, and Matt, the three musketeers, hoping that somehow they could save Trinity. Following this trace of *wrongness*, these tiny shreds of darkness hanging in the air, Elena led them forward. The trail was thin and faint, but it was there.

The darkness led them through the woods away from campus, mostly downhill. Their feet squished unpleasantly in the mud.

At last they came to the edge of a lake. Little ripples wet the toes of Elena's boots as she followed the dark aura right to the shore. When she strained her eyes, she could see its trail leading out over the water, toward the vast middle of the lake.

"It goes straight over the water," she told the others.

"We're not going out there," Matt objected. "We'll walk around, pick it up on the other side."

Elena shook her head, her eyes on the faint traces of darkness. "If we leave the trail, I probably won't be able to find it again. It's too faint."

"Elena ..." Matt said.

"I *can't*." She stared at him desperately. "We'll lose it."

Matt sighed. "I'll find a boat," he said, gesturing off to the right. "There's a boathouse over there."

Elena nodded, never taking her eyes from the dark trail, barely daring to blink. Behind her, she heard Darlene shift from foot to foot and sigh.

"I knew Trinity's family," the older hunter said. "Before her parents died, they were almost like my parents, too. They fed me, offered me a place to

stay, gave me advice I usually didn't follow. Trinity ... she's the only one left. I can't just let go of her."

"We'll do our best," Elena said, her eyes still fixed over the water. "I promise. I want to save her as much as you do." She was trying not to show it, but she was used to having Stefan, Meredith, and Bonnie on her side. With Bonnie gone and the others united against her, Elena felt so alone.

She gritted her teeth. She was doing the right thing, and that had to count for something.

There was a plashing of oars as Matt rowed up to them in a dented old rowboat. He jumped out and waded to shore, pulling the boat up behind him. "Here we go," he said. "There wasn't much selection. The crew team locks their boats up."

Elena sat in the front of the boat and pointed the way, while Darlene and Matt each took an oar.

As they traveled, the evil aura got darker and thicker. Elena was sure now that it was Solomon's. It felt ancient and cruel, like a bitter memory, something that had survived long millennia steeped in violence and hate. There was a strange yellowish-green mixed up in the smoky darkness, and Elena remembered what Jasmine and Meredith had said about Trinity's eyes.

As they neared the middle of the lake, the boat suddenly lurched. Elena yelped, grabbing hold of its side to keep her balance.

"What was that?" Darlene asked sharply.

"The wind must be picking up," Matt said, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice.

The waves were getting bigger, tossing the boat angrily in the water. Elena gripped the sides so hard her fingers ached.

"There's no wind," Darlene said suddenly, and Elena realized she was right. The sky was black and ominous, but the air was still. The waves moved more violently, the front of the boat going up in the air and then smacking down onto the water with a sickening lurch.

Right in front of Elena, the aura she'd been following disappeared, dissolving into nothingness.

"It's a trick," she gasped, just as the boat smacked into the water hard, dumping them out.

Elena was pulled down, down, down under the water, her hair streaming out behind her like a mermaid's. *No*, she thought, *no, please, no*. She'd

drowned once before, in the dark waters of the creek under Wickery Bridge. She'd *died*.

She kicked and thrashed, trying to swim up toward the surface, but it was as if some invisible force was pushing on her, sending her straight down. Her feet hit the muddy bottom and waterweed, soft as feathers, wrapped itself around her legs.

Holding her breath, she bent her legs and pushed off hard against the lake bottom, focusing on the dim light above. She could see shadows in the water above her—Matt and Darlene, and the vague outline of the boat.

She was so cold. Colder than made sense for a summer day, even in deep water.

The water had been cold the other time—the night she went off the bridge. Ice in her hair, the heavy painful push of water filling her lungs, the blackness that had sucked her in. The last thing she had seen was the hood of Matt's car swallowed by dark water.

I'm not going to make it. Elena pushed the thought away and kept swimming upward. Ice crystals were forming around her, she realized, sharp and crystalline.

She was about to break through when her hands hit something hard and flat and cold above her. She gasped in surprise, accidentally letting the water in, and red-and-black sparks burst in her vision. With the last of her strength, Elena pounded her fists against the barrier, felt for an opening. But it was no use.

The pond had frozen over above her. *Solomon*.

She tried to keep hitting at the ice, but she was floating down, down, toward the darkness below. *A human death*, she thought, and then, *Oh, Stefan, I'm so sorry to leave you this way*.

Some last spark in her flared in rebellion. She *wasn't* going to die like this, not again. She was a Guardian. Elena reached deep, deep inside herself and pulled hard at the last of her Power.

Something arced out of her, a pure white light, and with a sudden shock, the ice above her head cracked violently open. And somehow, with one last feeble kick, she managed to break the surface of the water.

She opened her eyes but for a moment, she still couldn't see. She was coughing, taking great rasping, greedy breaths, struggling not to slip back under. And then something grabbed her by the *hair*, was now holding her by the arms, and she started fighting it, turning and twisting blindly in the water.

“Elena! Elena!” There was a sharp pain across her face, and Elena stopped struggling, shocked. “Elena!” It was Matt, gripping onto one of her arms, his other hand raised to slap her again. Darlene, her wet hair matted, was clutching her other arm. The boat bobbed across the water next to them.

Tears streaming from her eyes, Elena clung to Matt, his body warm and solid next to her freezing one. She choked and gagged some more, spitting icy water. “It was a trick,” she managed to say after a minute, sobbing.

“I know. I can’t ... I don’t know what just happened, but I’m so glad you’re okay.” Matt gulped and took a deep breath, his arms tight around Elena. “We have to get back to shore.”

Matt boosted Elena up, steadying the boat with one hand. With a lot of effort, she managed to wiggle back over the side, scraping her stomach uncomfortably, and land in a graceless heap on the bottom of the boat.

They rowed back toward shore. The waves were gone and the surface of the lake was still. The ice had already almost melted in the summer sun, but here and there bits of it bobbed on the lake surface, so beautiful that Elena could barely believe it had just tried to kill her.

Matt frowned. “Maybe Stefan is right. Maybe it’s too dangerous to try to save Trinity.”

“No,” Elena said. Her head was pounding, her eyes burned, and her chest felt raw and painful, but she wasn’t going to listen to an argument about this again. “We’re not going to kill her. Not unless we know for sure that she’s already gone.”



“No sign here,” Jack said, tapping his earpiece. “But Solomon doesn’t usually leave evidence of kills. Stay north and keep your eyes open. We’re heading southwest.”

Meredith heard the murmur of Stefan and Alex’s reply, and then they ended the transmission. Jack jerked his chin and she followed him southwest through the woods, scanning carefully all around them.

She caught sight of a mark in the mud underfoot and lifted a hand to get Jack’s attention. “Footprints,” she said, keeping her voice low just in case. The indentations were indistinct, but they looked about Trinity’s size. Not many people would be walking this far back in the woods.

Jack knelt down to examine them, his blue-jeaned knees sinking into the soft soil. “Not her.” He gestured at the heel. “These are too big. Trinity has smaller feet than this.”

“Oh,” said Meredith, disappointed. They’d been searching the woods for a while, and so far, they hadn’t found anything. No bodies, no sign of anything unnatural. “Sorry,” she added, feeling useless.

“Solomon’s always been incredibly talented at staying invisible,” Jack said, as if he were reading her mind. “Andrés being able to find Solomon was the first break we’d had in a long time.” He straightened up and shot Meredith a crooked smile. “Any chance we’ll be able to talk Elena into trying again? I didn’t know how handy a Guardian could be.”

Meredith shook her head. “Elena won’t help hunt as long as she thinks she might be able to save Trinity.”

“Yeah, I see that.” Jack’s shoulders drooped and, for a minute, he looked very tired. “Trinity was a terrific hunter. But we have to accept that she’s gone and what we’re hunting is the vampire that killed her.”

“I know,” said Meredith. Her stave felt heavier than usual. There wasn’t a lot of pleasure in this hunt, knowing that, at best, it would end in fighting something that had the shape of a friend.

They walked on in silence for a while. A couple of times, Jack stopped to check footprints on the forest floor, but both times shook his head and went on. Not Trinity’s. Meredith kept her eyes peeled for any anomalies.

Then she spotted a familiar clump of plants: soft purple blossoms, branching green stems, and small-toothed leaves. “Look, vervain,” she said, pleased, and unzipped the pack she carried on her back. The opportunity to restock their vervain supply wasn’t something she would pass up. She began to pick the herb’s shoots one by one, careful not to crush their blossoms.

“I haven’t used vervain much,” Jack said, coming closer to look. “But I should probably start putting it in tea or something, like you do. Does it hurt Stefan, though? To be around it?”

“Not really. Of course, he could never drink from any of us, but I don’t think it would ever come to that.” She paused. “It’s important for the rest of us to keep our minds clear. We need all the defenses we can get.”

Jack crouched down to examine the spindly plants more closely. “I never would have considered hunting with a vampire before now,” he ventured. “Doesn’t it bother you? What he is?”

Meredith straightened up. She’d picked all the plants but left the roots, just the way Bonnie had taught her. They’d grow again and she could come back to this patch for more. “Stefan’s more than proven himself to me,” she said flatly. “And he’s not a killer. He doesn’t feed on humans.”

“I know that,” Jack said. “He told me. Doesn’t that make him weaker, though?” His dark eyes were intent.

“I guess, but he’s pretty strong anyway. He’s old, and vampires get stronger with age,” Meredith said, suddenly determined to defend Stefan. She took a few steps farther into the woods, continuing their trek, then stopped and turned back to Jack, feeling a fierce, protective rush of heat inside her. “I *trust* Stefan. I might be a hunter, but I’m always going to be on his side.”

Jack nodded and started walking again, shoulder to shoulder with her.

They walked in silence for a while after that. The day was getting hot, the sky a deep blue dome high above them. Meredith felt easier now, glad that she and Jack understood each other about Stefan. He wasn’t an enemy of the hunters.

“You look tired, Meredith,” Jack said, breaking the silence. “You doing all right?”

“I ... I haven’t been sleeping well lately,” she admitted.

“Anything wrong?”

“I keep having these weird dreams,” Meredith said hesitantly. It wasn’t really in her nature to talk about things like this; she hated seeming weak. But she felt strangely comfortable with Jack: He was a hunter; he was like her. “I dream that I’m in a hospital room, or maybe a lab, and I can’t move.” Shuddering, she realized how lame her words sounded. It was hard to explain how disturbing the dreams were. “I just feel like something terrible is happening,” she said weakly.

Jack nodded, his warm brown eyes sympathetic. “Sounds scary.” His arm brushed Meredith’s reassuringly. “But you know the dreams can’t hurt you, unless you let them. They’re just images your mind has created while you’re asleep. It’s reality we need to worry about.”

“I know.” And to her surprise, Meredith did feel a little better. Just bringing the dreams into the daylight, putting them into words, had made them seem harmless. Jack was right. What was scary about a few dreams when she fought monsters in real life?

Finally alone, Stefan gentled his Power and sent it questing through the woods. He was aching with hunger, but he hadn't let himself feed in front of the hunters. They didn't need him rubbing their faces in the fact that they were allied with their natural enemy.

He kept his Power warm and coaxing, beckoning *come to me, come to me*. Soon he heard a light step approaching through the undergrowth. A doe stepped delicately into the clearing, her big eyes fixed on Stefan.

"Yes, that's right," he murmured. He stretched out a hand, and the doe came to him willingly, nuzzling his fingers with her soft nose. She gazed up into his eyes and gradually grew still, until the only motion in the clearing was the steady rise and fall of her flanks. Stefan lowered his face to her neck, his canines lengthening, and drank.

Long before he was satisfied, Stefan pulled away. Taking any more would leave the deer weak, and he didn't want her vulnerable to other predators because of him. "Go on," he said, slapping her lightly on the side. Shocked out of her trance, the deer started violently and leaped away, crashing through the undergrowth as she went.

Just as Stefan raised his hand to wipe the blood from his lips, his phone rang.

He fished it out of his pocket, still feeling warm from feeding, and looked at the display. *Damon*.

He let it ring again, thinking of *not* answering, but stopped himself. Katherine was dead, and whether or not that was Stefan's fault, he owed it to Damon to talk to him. Stefan had tried several times to reach Damon right after Elena had confirmed what he guessed about Katherine's death, but this was the first time his brother was returning his calls.

“Stefan.” Damon’s voice sounded crisply determined, as if their last conversation had never happened. “I’ve been following up some leads on those vampires I keep meeting up with, and I wanted—”

“Damon,” Stefan broke in. “Are you all right?” He tried to put weight behind his words, knowing that Katherine’s death would have changed Damon, damaged him.

And if whatever had killed Katherine was still after Damon, he was in danger. Katherine had been old and strong and clever, not an easy target. Stefan rubbed a hand across his face and leaned back against a tree, suddenly worried about his brother.

He heard Damon sigh tiredly. “I will be,” he said quietly. “I’ve got their trail now.”

“The hunted becomes the hunter,” Stefan quipped, and Damon gave a short answering huff of laughter. “Damon, why did you tell Elena I wouldn’t help you?” Stefan asked.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Because you wouldn’t help me?” Damon said dryly.

“Did you *want* her to be angry with me?”

Damon was quiet for a moment, and then he exhaled, a long, weary gust of breath. “Fine,” he said. “I may have not been completely fair when I spoke to Elena. Katherine’s death wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t know things were so bad over there,” Stefan said, meeting Damon’s almost-apology with one of his own.

“It’s probably better that you’re not here. I’d only have to protect you.” There was an edge of humor in Damon’s voice, and Stefan relaxed, only to feel himself tensing again at his brother’s next words. “What’s going on with Elena?” Damon asked. “I can feel her pushing herself, all anxious and frustrated. It’s very distracting, like an itch.” His tone was light, but Stefan heard real worry behind it.

Stefan sighed. His head ached, and the lingering taste of the doe’s blood was suddenly sour in his mouth. Stumbling a little over his words, he tried to explain about Trinity, about Elena’s refusal to help Stefan and the hunters kill her. “I just want to protect her,” he finished miserably. “Why can’t Elena understand?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. “Listen, little brother,” Damon said finally, his voice unusually gentle. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“Thank you, Damon.” Stefan’s canines prickled with irritation. “Always a

pleasure to hear from you.”

“She’s not a child; she’s a *Guardian*, you halfwit,” Damon snapped. “She loves you—how much she loves you I can feel pounding through this connection between us, even when I don’t want to. She’s never going to stop. But she’s made to protect the innocent, and if she thinks this Trinity is one of them, then maybe you should listen to her. She might know something you don’t.”

Stefan felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Had he been underestimating Elena, ignoring her instincts, so sure that he knew what was right? “I have to go,” he said absently into the phone, and hung up.

Wiping the last traces of the doe’s blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, he headed for home.



Damon shook his head and tucked his phone back into his pocket. Stefan never had been able to take advice gracefully, not even when they’d been human. Damon had wanted to tell Stefan about Lifetime Solutions, just in case something happened, but he wasn’t going to bother calling back. He’d just have to be careful.

He put the whole conversation out of his head and focused on the office building in front of him. At first glance, there was nothing special about the gray-and-glass building; it was practically designed to blend in anonymously. Only the discreet sign showing an infinity symbol and the words LIFETIME SOLUTIONS confirmed that Damon had found what he was searching for.

And it hadn’t been easy to find, not at all. It had taken Damon days of searching, calling in favors, even consulting a witch, before he finally found his way here—to an inoffensive-looking office building on the outskirts of Zurich.

No legitimate business would be this hard to find—which made Damon sure that something extremely shady was going on behind these walls. Something that led straight to the seemingly unkillable vampires.

It was the end of the day, and office workers were beginning to stream from the building. Damon looked them over carefully, finally selecting a pretty young blonde who was walking alone, carrying an armful of files.

This would be easier if he was still able to use his Power to Influence anyone he wanted. Technically, the Guardian who bound him to Elena had only forbidden him from using his Influence to *feed*, but he’d fallen out of the habit of using his Power on humans in general. Besides, they were a fickle bunch, Guardians; he didn’t want to set them off.

And he still had his charm. Moving to intercept the woman, Damon bumped against her, sending her files flying to the ground.

“Oh, no,” Damon said in German, “I’m so sorry. Let me help you.”

The woman’s face had flushed with anger, but whatever sharp reply she was about to make died on her lips once she got a good look at him. He gave her his most beguiling smile and saw her soften instantly.

By the time they’d picked up her files, Damon had learned that the woman’s name was Anneli Yoder, that she was twenty-five, and that she was a secretary to a group of scientists at Lifetime Solutions.

“So, what do the scientists do in there?” he asked, his voice casual, his eyes tracing over her lips. Let her think he was asking just as an excuse to keep talking to her.

“Scientific research,” Anneli said brightly, tilting her head and looking up at Damon through her long golden lashes. “Health-care stuff. Longevity is one of the things my group is working on. Some rats will live longer on a specially restricted diet, did you know that?”

“Fascinating.” He carefully brushed a long golden curl back behind her ear, letting his hand linger. “I’m sure you’re invaluable to your team. What do *you* do?”

“Um, I file,” she said. “I take notes at the meetings and send reports to the administrators. I answer the phones.”

“Interesting.” Damon edged a little closer to her. Anneli’s heart sped up and her lips parted unconsciously. She smelled sweet, and he regretted for a moment that he couldn’t just feed on her. He was terribly hungry. “What sort of notes and reports?”

Anneli looked startled. “I don’t read the reports,” she said. “I just send them. And I don’t really have to remember what people say in the meeting. I know stenography.”

“I bet you do more than that,” Damon said, his lips curling in a half smile. “Don’t be modest.” He was tempted to lay a touch of Power on his words, but who knew what the Guardians would take amiss? It wouldn’t be worth it anyway; little Anneli didn’t seem to know much.

“Well,” she said, a frown creasing her smooth forehead. “I send blood samples to the lab. I have to make sure to label them correctly.”

“Samples for what?” Damon asked.

Anneli blinked her big blue eyes at him. “Research.”

I could have chosen a better informant, Damon thought with irritation, shooting Anneli his most blindingly bright smile. He'd chosen her because she seemed the easiest to influence without using his Power, and that apparently meant she was also the silliest woman in sight. He sent Anneli on her way, waving when she turned to shoot him an eager smile over her shoulder.

She didn't have the answers he needed. But what she did have, Damon thought with a smile, was a key card that gave her access to the building. He'd managed to slide it from her bag while they were picking up the files. With luck, Anneli wouldn't notice it was missing until tomorrow morning.

He would come back tonight and discover the secrets hidden here. Touching the key card hidden in the breast pocket of his jacket, Damon smiled.

Finally, he was on the verge of learning the secrets behind the strange vampires. The hunted would become the hunter, just like Stefan had said.

But for now he had some time to kill, and the vampires who pursued him hadn't caught up yet. Maybe he could meet someone in this city, some sweet Vittoria, and slake his hunger. Yes, Damon decided, casting one last glance at the bland office building, that was a good plan. He would come back tonight.



“Zander!” Bonnie objected, laughing, “I’m not tired at all. Let’s go out! I want to go dancing and see everybody.”

“Nope,” Zander said, holding her suitcase in one hand and barring the door with the other as Bonnie tried to turn around and head out of their building. “Now that I’ve got you in my clutches, I want you home tonight. You have no idea how lonely I’ve been in our apartment, all by myself.” He was grinning, but his beautiful blue eyes were serious, and Bonnie’s heart gave a funny little thump.

“I missed you, too,” she said, and Zander leaned down to kiss her, his mouth warm and soft against hers.

Actually, if Zander wants me all to himself tonight, I don’t really have a problem with that, Bonnie decided, letting herself fall into the kiss. “I guess I can wait till tomorrow to see the others,” she told him dreamily.

Zander snorted and wrapped his free arm firmly around her shoulders. “Good luck with that,” he said, and swung their apartment’s door open.

“Surprise!” several voices shouted. Bonnie squealed with delight and ran to throw her arms around Meredith.

“I missed you!” Bonnie shouted, and Meredith laughed, her arms tightening around her friend.

“Me, too,” Meredith said. She looked tired, Bonnie noticed, dark circles under her eyes that didn’t belong there, but she was smiling brightly. Alaric came up behind them and took Meredith’s hand in his.

“She’s been pining away since you’ve been gone,” he remarked to Bonnie. “Once things settle down, you two need some serious girl time.”

The Pack was scattered around the room, bouncing off the walls as usual: Shay and Jared enthusiastically making out in a corner of the kitchen,

Camden and Marcus knocking back shots, Tristan and Spencer insulting each other, all of them wrestling, drinking, eating, making noise. Bonnie beamed at them all equally, feeling benevolent. They could be loud and wild tonight and she wouldn't care. She was just glad to be home.

"How was Chicago?" Elena asked. She kissed Bonnie on the cheek and handed her a glass of wine. "Did you get a chance to go to the Art Institute?"

"No," Bonnie said, taking a sip. "We didn't get to see a lot of the city; we were mostly working on witch stuff." She was about to elaborate on this, how they'd spent their days in meditation and herb study, their evenings in spell work, when she realized that Elena wasn't listening. Her friend's eyes were looking past her, over Bonnie's shoulder, and Bonnie turned to see what Elena was looking at.

Stefan was on the opposite side of the room, looking at Elena, his face so miserable that Bonnie's heart ached in sympathy.

Bonnie found herself holding her breath, waiting for something—she wasn't sure what—to happen. But after a second, Stefan looked away, and the moment was broken. "Well!" said Elena overbrightly, her attention switching back to Bonnie. "I'd *love* to go to the Art Institute! They have some amazing eighteenth-century paintings."

"Okay," Bonnie said tentatively. She elbowed Zander and tried to communicate *what the hell is going on with them* with a subtle eyebrow raise, but Zander only shrugged.

Bonnie turned and saw Matt for the first time—she hadn't noticed him arrive. He looked terrible, his eyes red and puffy as if he hadn't slept for days.

"Matt!" she exclaimed, and hugged him quickly. "Where's Jasmine?"

Matt flinched. "We—uh, we broke up," he said, his voice cracking.

"Oh, Matt." She laid a sympathetic hand on his arm. "What happened?" But Matt was already turning away, heading toward the kitchen.

Confused, Bonnie looked to Zander again for an explanation, but he had moved away to break up a wrestling match between Enrique and Marcus. Grabbing hold of Meredith's wrist, Bonnie dragged her to the side of the room.

"What's going on with Elena and Stefan?" she hissed as soon as they were in a private corner. "And what happened with Matt and Jasmine?" She frowned, thinking of the strained looks behind her friends' smiles, even the slightly frantic quality of the werewolves' play. "Actually, what's wrong with *everybody*?"

Meredith bit her lip.

“Tell me,” Bonnie insisted.

“I will, I swear,” Meredith said in a rush. “But tonight, can’t we just be happy you’re back?”

“Show us a magic trick, Bonnie!” Enrique shouted, successfully distracted from his wrestling match.

Bonnie rolled her eyes at him, then pointed a finger at Meredith. “Tomorrow,” she said. “You’ll tell me everything.” Meredith nodded, and Bonnie walked to the center of the room, her head high. If they wanted her to have fun for one night before they told her about whatever awful things were going on, she would.

“Witch trick! Witch trick!” several of the werewolves were chanting, led by Enrique, and Bonnie smiled. Finally, she could show her friends—show Zander—what the last few weeks had been all about.

Centering herself the way she had learned in Chicago, her fingers resting against the falcon at her throat, she reached down, down, through the concrete and brick of her building to the earth beneath. Once she was planted as firmly as a tree, she stretched her consciousness *out*, and decisively grabbed on to the energy of everyone else in the room.

A shock jolted through her when she linked to Zander, and through him to the other werewolves. Their energy was rawer than she was used to, a tough, muscular power that made her quiver, feeling hyperalert. She could hear Zander’s heart beating steadily next to her, could smell the sharp scent of alcohol from everyone’s drinks and a sweet sticky scent coming off the cookies Elena had just brought into the room. Was this the way werewolves felt all the time?

She was more cautious linking to Stefan—his energy was powerful and dark and acutely aware. It had a colder undercurrent that made her shiver, cool and still, while the werewolves were full of life and warmth. Meredith’s energy was strangely similar to Stefan’s—*vampires and hunters, two sides of the same coin*, Bonnie thought, almost overwhelmed—while Alaric’s felt more familiar, like that of the witches she’d worked with in Chicago. Elena’s energy glowed golden and warmed Bonnie from the inside, as if her bones were gently simmering.

There was, Bonnie thought, a lot of Power here to draw on. She pulled it through herself carefully, taming the energy, and then focused it on Enrique, who was still leading the chant. Then she *shoved*.

With a startled yelp, Enrique hit the ceiling, a little harder than Bonnie had intended, and she held him there, the others' Power streaming through her.

After a moment of shocked silence, everyone, even Enrique, began to laugh.

* * *

Let's meet north of campus. 20 min?

Stefan read the text message from Jack and headed for the door. He and the lead hunter needed to talk. Jack was going to have to take Elena's Guardian instincts more seriously; they both were. Besides, it was getting late, and the party was breaking up anyway.

He sensed Elena behind him a moment before she touched his arm. "Stefan? Can I talk to you?" She looked pale and strained, her jewel-blue eyes enormous in her face.

"Yes, of course," Stefan said, his heart turning over. He'd wanted to pull her aside all evening. It had been torturous watching her, not knowing what she was thinking or how she felt about him right now. "Give me just one moment, and we'll walk home." He quickly texted Jack back *I can't tonight. Sorry*, and turned off his phone.

This was more important.

He and Elena went downstairs and out into the street together, then silently turned toward home. The night was warm and clear, stars glowing brightly overhead. The silence felt companionable, without the tension that had been hanging between him and Elena lately. After a while, Stefan's shoulders lowered, some of his anxiety leaving him. They were Elena and Stefan, and they loved each other, no matter what. He knew that. He took her hand, and she held on tightly.

"I wanted to apologize," Elena said carefully, still looking straight ahead. "Even though I don't agree with what you're doing, I know you're only trying to protect me." He admired her profile for a moment, her small nose and pointed chin, the soft swell of her lips. She looked so delicate, her skin pale and smooth in the moonlight, but he needed to remember that she wasn't.

"I'm sorry, too," he said, and she turned to look up into his face. "I know you're not helpless. You've always been strong, even before you found your Power." He remembered that high school girl, so determined and clever and unhappy, her brave spirit holding both him and Damon spellbound, despite all their years of experience, all the women they had known. After the first shock

of the similarity, it wasn't her resemblance to Katherine that had attracted them, not at all.

They had reached the door of their building. Stefan spoke hurriedly, eager to get out all the things he needed to say to her, somehow feeling that they needed to clear the air before they went inside. The next time they went home, he wanted to do it cleanly, without the strain and tension that had been hovering over them like a dark cloud.

"I've been so stubborn," Stefan said. "I know I have. I haven't been listening. Sometimes the only thing I can see is danger to you. I keep thinking, if I can just get rid of everything that threatens you, then we can be free. We can start our lives together, the lives that are going to last forever." He swallowed, suddenly finding himself very near to tears. "If I lost you, I couldn't survive it," he finished softly.

"Oh, Stefan." Elena stroked his cheek, then ran her fingers gently through his hair. "There will always be another danger. *This* is our life together. We can't waste it."

"I know," Stefan said, raising his hand to take hers. "And I should have listened to you about Trinity. I can't—I couldn't believe that she was still in there. But I believe in you. You're a Guardian and"—he had to force the words out, because so much of him was still screaming *protect Elena, save her*—"maybe you can sense something I don't." He sighed. "I trust you, Elena. If you want to try to save Trinity, I will help you."

It seemed so simple, suddenly. No matter what happened tomorrow—and he didn't know what would happen, because Trinity was dangerous and Solomon was still after Elena, none of those facts had changed—they were united again. "I love you," he told her. "More every day. We'll be together for a thousand years, longer, and I'm going to keep loving you for all of them."

Elena kissed him in answer, warm and insistent, and he pulled her even closer. They went upstairs to their apartment hand in hand, exchanging kisses the whole way.

"I have something for you," Stefan said when they were finally inside. His slow heart sped a little as he dug in his pocket for the key and put it in her hand. "It's to your house in Fell's Church," he explained, in answer to her inquiring look. "I bought it for you, from your Aunt Judith. When this is over, when Solomon is finally dead, we're going to go everywhere. I'll show you all the places I've been, and we'll find new parts of the world together. But we'll always have somewhere to come home to. We'll have a home together—your home."

Elena's eyes filled with tears. "Thank you," she whispered. "I was feeling so ... I wasn't ready to let go of it. I want that, a home we can come back to together."

Elena is my home, he thought and told her so, running his fingers over the soft skin of her cheeks, her forehead, her lips, her throat, as if he could memorize her by touch. She murmured softly back to him, her breath warm, her eyes bright with life. Stefan kissed her neck, feeling her blood beating through her veins, as steady and constant as the tides.

Elena cocked her head invitingly to one side, and he gently slid his canines beneath her skin. The first mouthful of Elena's rich, warm blood brought them even closer together, two pieces of a perfect whole. *Home*, he thought again.

Elena is my home.

#TVD11StelenaForever

“So,” Bonnie said playfully, “I couldn’t help noticing a little tension between you and Stefan last night, and then this morning you’re so chipper. Everything work out all right?” She wagged her eyebrows at Elena as she stirred her coffee, her spoon clinking gently against the side of the cup.

Elena could feel her cheeks heating up, which was ridiculous: She and Stefan had been living together for years. “That is a lot of pastry,” she said, deflecting Bonnie’s attention. “What did you do, buy out the bakery?”

They were back at Bonnie’s place for breakfast, just the two of them, and Bonnie and Zander’s kitchen table was heaped high with croissants, Danish, muffins, and doughnuts, as well as a big glass bowl of cut fruit and a pot of coffee.

“I know, right?” Bonnie said. “It’s all Zander. It’s either his way of showing how happy he is I’m home, or of making sure I get too big to get out the door again. I’ve never figured out if throwing all this food at me is a wolf thing or a guy thing or just a Zander thing. He’s a nurturer, I guess.” She stirred her coffee again and then frowned sternly at Elena. “But you’re not off the hook yet. Are you and Stefan fighting?”

“I don’t think it’s a guy thing,” Elena sidetracked. “Stefan doesn’t eat and barely remembers that I do. If I didn’t go to the store, there’d be nothing but blood bags and bottled water in our fridge.” Bonnie shot her a look, and Elena sighed. “We’re not fighting anymore. But we’ve still got to convince everyone else not to kill Trinity.”

“I still don’t understand about that. Why does everybody think Solomon is in Trinity’s body?” Bonnie asked.

Elena explained. She hadn’t seen Solomon—or the guy they had thought was Solomon—die, but she remembered everything Stefan and Meredith had told her, how he’d examined all of them, his intense concentration on Trinity

as she'd jittered and bled. How they'd thought that Solomon was dead, but then Trinity had escaped them and turned into a powerful vampire with Solomon's yellow gaze. How the "Solomon" they'd fought wasn't originally Solomon at all, but a man named Gabriel Dalton.

Bonnie listened intently, picking at an apple turnover and asking an occasional question. When Elena finished, she shook her head, puzzled. "It doesn't sound like body-swapping to *me*," she said stubbornly.

"I forgot you were the expert on this," Elena said, with just a touch of sarcasm, and Bonnie made a face at her.

"Listen," Bonnie said. "All I've been doing this last month is working with people's energies. Everybody's got a very distinct *flavor* that's all their own."

"Like their auras," Elena said, nodding in understanding. Everyone's aura was different. "But I still haven't been able to see Solomon's aura."

"Auras, energies. Potato, *potahto*," Bonnie said. "Just because you couldn't see it doesn't mean it wasn't there. Somehow, Solomon can shield it from you." She put down her fork and leaned forward, fixing Elena earnestly with her wide brown eyes. "My point is, if Solomon swapped bodies with Trinity, everyone would have known right away, before Solomon—or Gabriel, or whoever—died. They'd be able to tell that it wasn't the same person." Elena started to object, and Bonnie held up her hand. "Think about it," she said. "Nobody ever thought Katherine was you for more than a few minutes, even though you looked so much alike. Different energy. Similar shells, but different inside. If the people who knew her thought it was still Trinity in there—and they hunted with her, they must know her really well—then it *was* Trinity."

"But when Meredith saw her, she was a vampire," Elena said helplessly. "And she had Solomon's eyes. Do you think she's possessed? That was Alaric's other theory."

"I'm pretty sure you have to be a demon to possess somebody," Bonnie said dismissively. "Old Ones aren't demons; they're just really powerful, ancient vampires." She went back to picking at her turnover, frowning thoughtfully. "I think I know what it is, though," she said.

Elena stared at her. "Go on."

Bonnie rested her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands. "I can do a lot of things now that I couldn't do before, some of them by drawing on other people's energy, like I did last night." Elena nodded. She'd felt Bonnie tugging at her, knew she had somehow used Elena's own Power to

levitate Enrique. “And if I were a bad person, a really Powerful one”—Bonnie looked at Elena—“like an Old One, I think I could go the other way.”

“What do you mean?” Elena asked.

“If I were strong enough, I could take my own energy and force it *into* someone else instead of using their energy. I could fill them up with myself and make them do whatever I wanted. It would just be flipping the switch the other way, really.”

“That sounds like possession,” Elena said, confused, but Bonnie shook her head impatiently.

“No,” she explained. “In possession, the demon is actually going inside the person and taking their body for their own. This would be more like a really powerful kind of compulsion.

Solomon isn’t *inside* Trinity; he’s just *using* her. Since he’s so strong, he could transfer his own attributes—like the yellow eyes, and being a vampire—but she’s just compelled. She’s still there, underneath all this Power he’s forcing into her.”

Hope bloomed in Elena’s chest. This was scary stuff, but it was also the first real suggestion that saving Trinity was a viable plan. “So you’re saying Solomon *does* have a body, still out there somewhere,” she said breathlessly. “We’ve been hunting the wrong targets all along—first Gabriel, and then Trinity—while the right one, the real Solomon, has stayed hidden.”

Bonnie grinned and jumped up from the table, rattling the plates. She held her hand out to Elena. “Come on,” she said impatiently. “If you’ve been looking for the wrong people all this time, maybe it’s time to start trying to find the right one.”

In the bedroom, Bonnie spread out a map out over the king-size bed. “This is the whole state,” she told Elena. “This kind of compulsion must take a lot of Power. I don’t think he could do it from somewhere farther away.” She placed a purple candle on each post of the bed, carefully, then lit them all. “Purple’s good for divination and psychic stuff,” she explained.

She stepped across from Elena, the bed and the map between them, and stretched out her hands. “I need you to use your Guardian Power,” she told her.

Elena shook her head. “It doesn’t work on Solomon,” she said. “I’ve been searching and searching for him. I couldn’t find Gabriel or Trinity, either. There’s no trace of them.”

“Like I said, he must be able to shield himself from you somehow,”

Bonnie said. “He knows that you can find evil and is doing something to protect himself from you.” She grinned mischievously, her teeth white in the candlelight. “But he doesn’t know what *I* can do. Trust me.”

And Elena did. She reached for Bonnie’s hands, then, shutting her eyes for a moment, felt for her Power. She thought of the evil Solomon had done: taking over Trinity and the unknown Gabriel Dalton; killing gentle Andrés, his blood flowing red across the bed; poor little broken Sammy.

When she opened her eyes, Elena could see Bonnie’s aura, gentle and rosy pink all around her, and her own golden one next to it, but there was no trace of evil, nothing for her to follow. “You see the problem,” she said.

“Just wait,” Bonnie told her. She began to mutter words in some ancient language, and the candle flames stretched higher, flickered wildly, although there was no breeze. The little hairs on Elena’s arms prickled.

Then, Bonnie’s aura was mixing with her own, the rose and the gold looking like the shifting colors of a summer dawn. At the same time, Elena felt a gentle, insistent tugging somewhere near her collarbone—Bonnie asking *let me in, let me in*. Gulping nervously, she tried to open herself and let Bonnie take what she needed.

Bonnie spoke faster, the ancient words tumbling over one another in a low monotone, and then, suddenly, she fell silent. From each candle a golden ray arced over Bonnie and Elena, over the bed, to meet above the map. A single point of flame fell, scorching the map. And then the candles flickered out.

“There,” Bonnie said, laying her finger on the scorch mark. “It worked.”

Elena stared numbly. “We’ve been looking in the wrong places all along,” she whispered. “Solomon’s not even in Dalcrest.”

After more than five hundred years, Stefan didn't think he should be afraid of the dark, but something about this place unnerved him. They were deep underground in an old reservoir—water hadn't been stored here for years, but the stone was still damp and clammy, moss spotting its surface. Dim light filtered down from above, just enough to navigate by.

"It's like some kind of pagan underworld," Alaric said, wonderingly.

Stefan smiled weakly in acknowledgment but didn't reply. It was so quiet here, just the soft sound of their footsteps and a steady drip of water, somewhere out in the dark. The heavy graveyard scent of the wet stone overlaid everything, and the echo distorted sound, making it impossible for Stefan to tell if there were any noises or smells that didn't belong.

The werewolves didn't like it. They were interspersed among the humans, whining softly in protest, their tails down and their ears back unhappily. Bonnie, striding along just behind Elena, had her hand on Zander's back, her fingers twined in his thick white fur. Stefan wasn't sure who was reassuring whom.

This was Bonnie and Elena's mission, and Stefan hoped that they were right, that Solomon was here somewhere, not in Trinity's body back in Dalcrest. The tightness in Jack's face said that he was taking a lot on faith and wasn't happy about it. "Every moment that we waste here, Trinity could be murdering innocent people," he muttered to Meredith under his breath, but Stefan, with his sharp vampiric senses, heard him.

When Elena had told him that she and Bonnie believed they knew where the real Solomon was hidden—in an abandoned underground reservoir outside a small town called Stag's Crossing, about forty miles from Dalcrest—Stefan had hesitated.

But now, watching brave, beautiful Elena following a trail only she could

see, Stefan had faith in her. Elena always came through.

It was getting colder, he realized suddenly. Frost crunched under his heels. Meredith, usually so sure-footed, slipped and swore as she struggled to regain her balance. The wolves drew closer to the humans, and Tristan let out an uneasy whine.

They rounded a corner, and something moved ahead of them in the dim light. Matt flicked up his crossbow and shot without hesitating.

The crossbow bolt stopped in midair and clattered to the ground.

Stefan tried to leap forward and found that, just like at the Plantation Museum, his muscles refused to obey him. The others in front of him were equally still, Zander frozen with one paw raised, Bonnie in the act of turning her head to look toward Elena.

Solomon stepped out of the darkness.

He was not, Stefan thought with a shock of surprise, particularly impressive. At first glance, he was a small, almost timid-looking man, the type of person you might pass on the street without a second look. Nothing like handsome Gabriel Dalton or tall, sweet-faced Trinity. His light brown hair straggled down past his ears, and his shoulders were hunched. Were it not for the Power that held them all helpless, Solomon would have been easy to underestimate.

Then he looked up and his eyes flashed golden in the darkness, and Stefan knew this was him. Those eyes were full of cold intelligence and pure malice, the eyes of something slimy and primeval that had watched from under a rock for countless millennia as civilizations rose and fell.

Solomon stepped closer to them, closer to Elena, and Stefan went cold with dread.

His worst fears were being realized, and there was nothing Stefan could do about it. He couldn't move. He couldn't speak. He could barely breathe. All he could do was watch as everything that mattered to him was about to be destroyed.

"A pretty girl," Solomon said, his voice dry and rasping, and reached a hand out to touch Elena's face.

Stefan wanted to scream with rage, wanted to strike Solomon and knock him back, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't move.

Almost gently, Solomon traced a finger over Elena's cheekbones, over her soft lips, across her delicate chin. And everywhere he touched, Elena began to bleed, tiny droplets coming through her skin and running down the surface of

her face. Stefan could smell the richness of Elena's blood everywhere, and his canines throbbed and lengthened against his will.

"Lovely," Solomon said approvingly. He stroked his fingers through Elena's blood, smearing it in feathery patterns across her face. "Perfect."

There were footsteps coming toward them, and Solomon looked up, his golden eyes sharp. Stefan's hopes rose for a second. Maybe this was someone who could help them.

"There you are," Solomon said approvingly, and Stefan's heart sank again. Even though he couldn't see her yet, he knew who it was. Trinity. Whatever was left of her, fully in thrall to this wicked Old One.

Please, not Elena. Let her live, he prayed to the God he had believed in unquestioningly as a human. A stream of blood ran down Elena's chin, dripping to stain her shirt. She was terribly pale.

Beyond Elena, he could see Solomon, his golden eyes following Trinity. She hesitated directly behind Stefan, then passed him by. A moment later there was the sound of skin striking skin and a steady trickle of liquid hitting the stone floor. *Blood*, Stefan realized with horror, smelling the coppery, rich scent. Trinity had hurt someone, but he didn't know who.

Solomon smiled. "Come here," he ordered.

Trinity walked straight to Solomon and stood before him, her hands folded in front of her and her face upturned to his in a parody of an obedient child. Golden eyes gazed into golden eyes, and Solomon's smile broadened.

"Hunters," he said slowly. "Your old friends. Which shall we kill first?" He looked from one side of the group to the other, slowly, and then nodded. "Jack, of course." His gaze narrowed on the hunter, next to Stefan. "I don't trust him."

Trinity came back toward them, her shoulder brushing Stefan's as she stretched to reach Jack's throat. She gave a soft sound of satisfaction as her teeth pierced his vein. Stefan could smell her now. She stank revoltingly of old blood and sweat.

Solomon stretched out a hand toward Elena again, his fingernails long and black with filth. Tracing one across Elena's collarbone, he sighed theatrically. "So pretty," he said again. "I'd like to keep you, little Guardian, make you mine." Where his finger traced, Elena's skin split open, blood pouring out over her collarbone, down across her chest, staining her shirt with gore. "Sadly, though, I think I should get rid of you now. Your blood is too much a danger to me," Solomon finished quietly.

Staring helplessly straight ahead, Stefan wanted to die. He would gladly die, if it would protect Elena.

Elena's arm quivered.

At first Stefan thought it was an illusion of the dim, wavery light. But then Bonnie blinked, a slow, definite blink. They were still touching, he realized. They were working together, in the same way that they had managed to work together to locate Solomon.

Elena's eyes flicked to meet Stefan's, clear, brilliant blue despite the blood running down her face. In them he could read her message: *Be ready*.

It was so cold that the first touch of warmth spreading inside him felt like fire. He knew without questioning that it came from Elena.

Trinity was feeding from Jack beside him, making thick slurping noises. Solomon glanced away from Elena for a moment, watching whatever horror his puppet was perpetrating, and then turned his gaze back to her, drawing a knife from a sheath at his waist. Stefan recognized it: It had once been Trinity's. A hunter's knife.

The burning warmth filled his body. Stefan knew he would only get this one chance, and that only if he were very lucky. Solomon pressed the knife slowly against Elena's throat. Suddenly, Stefan sucked in a breath, all his muscles screaming in protest as he forced them to move at once. Lunging forward with a massive effort, Stefan raised his machete and brought it across Solomon's neck.

Solomon's body fell slowly and as it landed, the ice beneath him cracked. For a long moment, everything was silent. Then Trinity fell backward to the ground and began to sob.

Stefan couldn't look away from Solomon, a small skinny body on the cold stone floor. He looked so inconsequential. How many people had he sent out to the world to dance at his command? Jack had been right: Solomon left no trace, because he didn't need to be there to destroy.

When Stefan finally tore his eyes away, he saw that Trinity was kneeling next to Jack, his head cradled in her hands. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed, her eyes their normal, untroubled blue. "Oh, my God. I don't ... it's all like a dream. A nightmare."

"It's okay, Trinity," Jack reassured her. Blood was still streaming from the bite on his neck, but he wiped it away. "It's all going to be all right."

And then Elena was in Stefan's arms, whispering, "We did it, we did it," kissing his face and holding him so tight he thought she might never let him

go. The open cut on her collarbone was barely beginning to clot. Stefan automatically bit his own wrist and held it out for her.

“Drink,” he said. She bent to suck at his wrist, and he watched her affectionately. “*You* did it,” he told her. “You and Bonnie.” He could feel the glorious, thankful strength of Elena, and he lost himself in it, feeling his own triumph and relief echoed back to him.

We’re free at last, he told her silently. *We can finally live in peace.*

#TVD11StakingSolomon



Now here, Damon thought smugly, *is the good stuff.*

It had taken awhile to find it. At first, Lifetime Solutions' offices seemed disappointingly reputable. There was a room full of caged lab rats, none of them growing fangs or second heads. The notes on their treatments were incomprehensible to Damon, just lists of experimental medications and reactions in highly technical jargon. The papers in the filing cabinets were similarly dull, and he hadn't been able to bypass the passwords to investigate the computers properly.

Everything seemed boringly, incomprehensibly normal. If Damon hadn't found a business card from this company in the pocket of one of those strange vampires, he would have dismissed it as completely ordinary.

Now he was standing in what was clearly the CEO's office. Bigger and more richly furnished than any of the others, with wide floor-to-ceiling windows and a large seating area. Damon had gone through the desk drawers, the cabinets at one side of the room, the coat closet in the corner. Nothing.

Nothing except that the top drawer of the desk seemed shallower than it ought to be. Damon jiggled it, then carefully tilted the drawer back and slid it forward. Just as he'd thought, there was a small keyhole at the top of the back of the drawer. A secret, locked compartment. Interesting.

The lock wasn't much of a challenge; lock picking was a skill Damon had learned centuries ago. Inside the compartment was a thick notebook bound in brown leather.

Damon quickly flipped through the pages, growing ever more curious. It seemed to be some kind of journal: part philosophical musings, part the record of a series of experiments.

There must be a way to improve with science what can be imperfectly wrought by magic, Damon read. My subjects begin to develop, then die

without warning, their hearts bursting under their new stresses. Is there a way to strengthen the circulatory system and allow improved capacity? Multiple surgeries will be necessary.

Subject K4 showed promise, but the side effects of the adrenaline and stimulants were too great. Subject proved ungovernable and prone to uncontrollable fits of rage. After dismemberment of lab assistant, subject was destroyed.

“Subject K4 didn’t want to bow down to you, did he, Doctor?” Damon muttered. The back of his neck was prickling uneasily as he read: There was something very, very wrong here. He flipped forward a few pages and read on.

After the deaths of the first batch of test subjects and the disaster of Subject K4, the doctor had adjusted the dosages and streamlined a course of surgeries, not just on the circulatory system but on the muscles, digestive system, brain, and even facial structure and teeth.

And, gradually, his experiments began to survive.

A high dose of iron and protein is necessary to combat the anemia that results from the new bone density. Is the traditional blood diet less mystical and more practical than previously thought?

Blood diet. Damon suddenly realized what he was reading. This person was trying to *make* vampires.

Trying, and apparently succeeding. As the doctor fine-tuned the surgeries and medications for his experiments, the pages Damon was reading became a record of triumphs.

As I had suspected, there is no reason but mysticism for the limitations of the natural vampire. By rerouting the circulatory system and adding a large dose of melanin to the initial medication, I have made my subjects impervious to the traditional methods of controlling their population: Subjects can walk easily in the sun and are not harmed by wood to the heart.

Nonphysical methods of identification proved more difficult at first to bypass. Test subjects were readily identified as unnatural by humans with highly developed senses: so-called “psychics” and “seers.”

Auras, Damon thought. *He’s talking about people who can read auras, like Elena.* The doctor had eventually found a way around this, too. Through intensive meditation and a high dosage of serotonin inhibitors, the lab-created vampires had managed to learn to hide or disguise their auras.

This, Damon thought, absently tapping the page with one finger, could be

useful. He read on.

Finally, after so many trials and errors, the experiment has been an unqualified success. My subjects have all the advantages of the natural vampire: They do not appear to age or contract illnesses, they are stronger and faster than humans, they have highly developed senses. And yet I have been able to circumvent the disadvantages that keep natural vampires from being the perfect predators: Unlike their wild cousins, my subjects are not endangered by wood or sunlight. The time has come to move on to Stage B of the experiment.

Stage B? Damon flipped forward again and blinked in surprise at what he found. In the next stage of his experiment, the doctor had used the technique on himself. It made sense, Damon supposed. Certainly if he had created the ultimate predator, he wouldn't want to remain prey.

This didn't really explain why the doctor's lab-manufactured vampires had been coming after Damon, though. He kept reading.

To take dominance in the natural world, it is necessary to eliminate competitive species. The vampire has survived unchanged for too long; in some cases for thousands of years. These targets must be eliminated for my bold new world to be possible. The greatest threat to my new creations is their inspiration: the traditional vampire.

Turning one more page, Damon found two lists of names.

The first was Old Ones, he recognized immediately. First names only—the Old Ones came from a time before people needed more than one name. *Klaus, Celine, Benevenuto, Alexander*—Old Ones he knew Stefan and his friends had killed, each one crossed out in black ink. Other names he didn't recognize—*Chihiro, Gunnar of the North, Milimo, Pachacuti*—were crossed out in red.

Only one name remained unmarked: *Solomon*.

"You've been busy, Doctor Jekyll," Damon muttered, tracing over the red-crossed names with one finger.

The second list was much longer—and much worse. Many of these crossed-out names were vampires Damon knew.

Anne Grimmsdotir: a quiet, fierce girl who had wandered the North since the days of the Vikings. She didn't talk much, but she was graceful and quick.

Sophia Alexiou: beautiful, elegant Sophia, whom Damon had spent a Mediterranean winter with once, more than a century ago.

Abioye Ogunwale: Sharp-tongued and stubborn, he'd always been a

gambler. He'd won Damon's favorite boots in a card game, back in the seventeenth century.

Damon stared at the names, an uncomfortable tightness growing in his chest. They hadn't been friends, these vampires—Damon didn't really make friends—but they were people Damon had met again and again over the course of a very long life. Old vampires, strong vampires, who'd hunted and traveled and survived for centuries. All of them *murdered* for a bold new world of man-made vampires?

Halfway down the page was written: *Katherine von Swartzschild*. It hadn't been crossed out yet. "Behind the times, Doctor," Damon said softly, feeling a pang in his chest at the sight of her name.

At the bottom of the page, the last names on the list: *Damon Salvatore*. *Stefan Salvatore*. *Dalcrest, Virginia*.

Damon placed his hand flat on the book and took a breath, thinking hard.

There were very few people in the world about whom he gave a damn. Now that Katherine was dead, that list was pretty much limited to Elena and Stefan. If pushed, he might admit to a sentimental fondness for his little redbird Bonnie, and a grudging respect for Meredith, the hunter. And every single one of these people was in Dalcrest, Virginia.

Damon stuffed the book into the front of his coat pocket and slipped out of the lab, as silent as a shadow, almost as if he were already becoming a ghost.

#TVD11TVDsMostWanted

* * *

"A toast!" Alaric said, raising his glass high. "To the end of the Old Ones!" Everyone clinked their glasses as a wave of giddy laughter flooded Elena and Stefan's apartment. Wrapping her fingers around the stem of her wineglass, Elena looked around and smiled at their gathered friends.

It was hard to believe that a few hours ago they'd been in the dim, cold underground, unable to move. Elena had been so sure it was the end for all of them.

And then, in the midst of the cold, she'd felt a tiny spark of warmth. Bonnie's hand, where it touched her arm, was the only warm thing in the whole world. *I'm here, Elena*, she heard Bonnie say into her mind. *Let me in*. Focusing all her energy on that one spot, Elena had sent Power to Bonnie in a steady, thin stream. And Bonnie had freed Stefan.

Stefan's arms wrapped around her from behind, jarring her from the

unsettling memory. He kissed her neck lightly, then laughed, more relaxed than Elena had seen him in a long, long time. *We're free*, he told her silently whenever their lips touched, *we're free. You're safe.*

Tomorrow they would make plans—head out to Europe to find Damon, and make sure he was safe. Then together they would wander Europe, all of it, the cobblestone streets of Stefan's past and the tall, glass cities of the modern age. *Paris*, Elena thought, remembering the time she had been there in high school, before she even met Stefan. It felt like a lifetime ago. She couldn't wait to go back and see it all again, with Stefan by her side.

Tomorrow they would begin the rest of their endless lives. But for now they were with their friends, and Elena was happy.

Even Trinity was with them, looking pale and thin, but alive.

Jack stood, and Trinity looked up at him, her gaze full of hero worship. *I wonder if he'll tell her he was planning to kill her*, part of Elena wondered, somewhat cynically.

Jack smiled widely and warmly around at them all. He was using his hunter's stave like a walking stick, resting his weight on it lightly. "To unlikely allies and unexpected friends," he said, raising his glass.

Elena joined in the toast and then felt her phone vibrate. She paused to discreetly fish it out of her bag and glance at the screen. It was a voice mail from Damon. Tentatively, she poked at the connection between them, and almost recoiled at the anxiety pulsing through their bond.

Before she could slip quietly out of the room, Jack walked over to her and Stefan, blocking her exit. "Stefan, you've been a huge help in this hunt," he said. Elena nudged Stefan with her foot, and they exchanged a private smile. She was pretty sure that Stefan had ended up *leading* the hunt, not just helping with it.

"I can't thank you enough," Stefan told Jack solemnly. "To know that all the threats we've been chasing for so long are gone at last. Elena and I are so happy."

"*Almost* all the threats," Jack said thoughtfully, and Elena's head snapped up at the new, darker tone in his voice. And then she saw, panicking, that Jack's aura was *wrong*. Rusty red, the color of dried blood, was running through the familiar warm brown, spreading like a web of veins. Elena opened her mouth to shout a warning, but she was too late.

Baring his teeth to show his elongated canines—and *how could he be a vampire, Elena would have known, Stefan would have known*—Jack moved,

faster and smoother than Elena would have believed possible, and slammed his stave cleanly through Stefan's chest. Stefan gasped, a long, rattling gasp, then fell heavily to the floor. Jack ran out the door before Elena could even scream.

Elena fell to her knees as the room erupted into chaos around her. Alaric laid a hand on the stave to pull it from Stefan's chest but Meredith stopped him. "Pulling it out won't help," she said. "If it's still there, it might give him more time."

Elena only had eyes for Stefan, but he was blurry through her tears. "Hold on, Stefan," she said desperately, stroking his face. He muttered something and scrabbled at her arm, his fingers weak. "Bonnie!" Elena screamed. "Bonnie, can't you fix—?" Bonnie dropped to her knees beside them, her face white, but shook her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't think there's a spell for this—" she said frantically.

Elena reached for her Guardian Power and sent its golden light racing through Stefan, trying to heal what was broken. But the dark and cold radiating from the stake in his heart swallowed up the light as fast as she could feed it to him. He was sinking; she could feel it. He was slipping away.

* * *

Stefan's eyes were glazing over, and his grip on Elena's arm loosened. "No, no!" Elena was yelling, grabbing at him, trying to keep him with her. "*Please, Stefan.*"

Tears were dripping off her face onto Stefan's, running over his pale cheeks. *No, no, no*, Elena's mind babbled frantically. *Not like this; we're supposed to have forever together. Please. Please.*

Stefan's eyes were moving beneath his lids, flicking from side to side. His breath rattled in his chest. His face was tight, almost fearful. Elena took his hand in hers and pressed her lips to his.

Her mind and Stefan's touched, the instant connection between them as strong as ever, and she wrapped him in her consciousness, trying to hold him, to keep him safe. She would never let him be afraid, not if she could help it.

But darkness and emptiness were spreading through him. *Stefan, my love, my darling*, she thought, *please*. That was all she could think of, protestations of love, pet names, and the single word *please*. *Please stay with me, my darling one. Hang on. I love you.* Her tears fell against his cold face, her lips warm against his cold ones.

Elena? His mind reached out for hers. He was disoriented, and she clung

to him, trying to reassure him. *It's all right*, she thought desperately. *It'll all be okay.*

You can't save me, Elena. Stefan's thought was terribly sad, but there was no trace of fear in it. *I'm so sorry. I thought we'd be safe. I thought we'd have our whole, long lives together. I wish there were time.*

No! Don't go, Elena thought, pleading, frantic. *Please, I can't let you go.*

I don't want to. But be happy without me. Promise me you'll find a way to be happy.

Elena couldn't imagine ever being happy again. *I promise*, she thought, tears running down her face.

Believe in yourself. Trust your friends. He sounded terribly tired, but there was a warmth in his thoughts that felt like a smile. *Never forget how much I love you. You deserve to be loved.*

Elena choked back a sob. *Stefan, you're the love of my life. My whole life.* His consciousness brushed against hers like a caress.

The darkness that had infected Stefan rolled on, taking over more and more of him, as unstoppable as a tide. Elena held onto him, sending more of her Power through him, but the darkness swallowed it like a black hole, swallowed everything, until she was just lying with her arms around him, murmuring, *Stefan, I love you, I love you, please ...*

The dark tide rolled out, and took Stefan with it.

#TVD11RIP

“I gave Elena valerian and some other sedative herbs and sat with her until she fell asleep,” Bonnie said, coming out of the bedroom. “She couldn’t stop crying, but eventually she just passed out.”

She had felt so helpless, watching Elena lying there, tears slipping silently from her closed eyes and down her cheeks, looking small in the bed she’d shared with Stefan.

Tears flooded Bonnie’s eyes. Stefan had been so strong, the calm at the center of the storm, and he and Elena had been the focus of their group, the ones the others all revolved around. She couldn’t quite comprehend him being *dead*.

Meredith and Matt were seated on the sofa in the living room, looking as broken as Bonnie felt. Bonnie went over to them with a sigh, pulling her feet under her on the sofa and curling up next to Meredith. Zander was with most of the Pack, combing the woods in search of Jack, while Alaric was researching, trying to find what kind of vampire could hide his aura like Jack had. Trinity, Darlene, and Alex had returned to their motel, where four of the Pack watched over them, just in case. But the remaining hunters had seemed as shocked as the others that Jack was a vampire. Bonnie remembered that Jack wasn’t really one of them, that he had come to this group and enlisted them in his quest to kill Solomon.

Bonnie was glad the others were somewhere else. It felt right to watch over Elena with just Matt and Meredith, the four friends who had gone through so much together, who had known one another longest of all.

“I just don’t understand it,” Matt murmured, twisting his hands together miserably. “How did we not know Jack was a vampire? And why would he kill Stefan? They’d been working together. They were *friends*.”

“He walked in the daylight, without a ring,” Meredith said dully. “He was

obsessed with killing vampires. He was a hunter. But he was a vampire, too?”

Matt cleared his throat. When they looked at him, he straightened his shoulders and said, with an obvious effort, “We should call Damon.”

Meredith and Bonnie stared at each other in dismay. How could they have forgotten Damon? Despite all the years of conflict between the brothers, Bonnie was certain that Stefan’s death would tear Damon apart. And an angry, grieving Damon might do anything.

She could see that Meredith was having the same thoughts.

“Elena should tell him,” Meredith said.

Matt frowned. “Elena’s got enough on her plate. We need to make things easier for her.”

Bonnie shook her head decisively, her red curls flying around her. “Elena’s the only one who can keep Damon from totally losing it. And she’ll probably *want* to tell him. We should wait till morning anyway, and talk to her about it then.”

“I guess you’re right,” Matt said. “I just—all I want to do is help her.”

“We all do,” Bonnie said, taking Matt’s broad hand in her smaller one. “But I think the only thing we can do now is be here if she needs us.”

Matt rubbed a tired hand over his eyes. “I still can’t believe it,” he said. “I can’t ... I never thought I’d see Stefan fall like that. Any of us, I worried about, but I thought he’d go on forever.”

Bonnie buried her face in Matt’s shoulder and, even though she’d promised herself she’d be strong, felt a few tears squeeze out of her eyes. “Let’s stay here tonight,” she said, her voice muffled in his shirt. “Elena shouldn’t be alone.”

“The sofa folds out,” Meredith said, jumping up, glad of something practical to do. “And I think there’s an air mattress in the closet.”

They got ready for bed quietly. Bonnie climbed into the sofa bed next to Meredith and turned out the light. Listening to Meredith’s breathing next to her and Matt’s from the floor by the bed, she knew that neither of them was going to fall asleep tonight either.

They would lie here together, in the long dark hours before dawn, watching over Elena. It was the only thing they could do.



In the pitch-blackness, Elena’s eyes flew open. She didn’t know how much time had passed since she drank Bonnie’s potion, but it had put her into a

deep, dreamless sleep.

And now she was awake, and something was scratching at the window.

She was just drawing breath to scream when she realized that of course she knew who it was. She could feel him. Slipping out of bed, Elena fumbled her way toward the window, banging her leg against her bureau in the dark.

Damon was sitting on a tree branch outside, his inscrutable black eyes fixed on her. "Invite me in, princess," he said.

"Come in," Elena said, and stumbled back from the window as Damon stepped inside, as graceful as ever. When he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, she realized he was shaking.

She didn't need to tell him anything, she realized, somewhat gratefully. He already knew, must have known as soon as he'd felt her anguish. His heartache came steadily through the bond between them, mirroring hers.

"I need ..." he said, his voice broken. "Can I hold you?" She nodded wordlessly.

On top of the covers, he held her loosely, his arms strong and comforting. Elena rested her head against his chest and finally let go, knowing that the link between them made words unnecessary, his pain and her pain blending until it was all one shared emotion. Sobbing, she wiped a hand roughly under her nose. She was gross and covered with snot and tears and she didn't care.

"Stefan would have liked to have seen you again," she told Damon in a thick, tear-choked voice. "He missed you while you were gone."

"I know. I missed him, too," Damon said, and their bond throbbed with an extra ache: loneliness, and regret over time lost. He stroked her hair with a heavy, comforting hand.

Elena pressed her face against his chest. Damon, she realized, was the only person in the world who understood exactly what she had lost. She held onto him fiercely as they grieved together, weeping for Stefan and for themselves.

#TVD11DamonReturns



The sun was so bright Matt had to shield his eyes as he came up to his apartment building. It had been a long, terrible night. Whenever he started to fall into sleep, he had remembered Stefan, a stave in his chest and a terrible emptiness in his eyes, falling like a broken doll. Remembered Elena's screams. Stefan's blood had dried on his sleeve.

Stefan, his friend. Once his rival for Elena's affection—although it had never been much of a contest—briefly his football teammate, his ally against the darkness. Gone. Matt should have sensed that something was wrong about Jack. He should have protected his friends.

Jasmine was standing outside the front door of his building. Seeing her in the glaring sunshine gave Matt a weird sense of *déjà vu*, as if he had fallen through a wormhole and ended up back at that terrible morning when she had told him good-bye.

"What do you want?" he asked her, his voice flat. He didn't want to be rude—Jasmine had every right to have left him—but he was so tired. He couldn't handle anything more today.

"I miss you," Jasmine said, her words rushed. She looked up at him with big, appealing eyes, a tiny nervous smile tilting up the corners of her mouth. "I miss you so much, Matt. Can't we try again?"

Matt felt as if he was dissolving, falling into a million pieces. He wanted that so badly. Warm, loving, beautiful Jasmine. She healed people, and even though she saw so much that was terrible—every doctor did—she stayed innocent; she was *good* all the way through.

"I can't," he said roughly. "Nothing's changed, Jasmine. No, things have gotten *worse*." He brandished his spattered sleeve at her. "See that? It's Stefan's blood; Stefan is *dead*."

Ignoring her soft, pained gasp, he went on. “Everything’s dark and scary and awful, but I still can’t turn my back on my friends. I can’t ignore the darkness.” His eyes burned, and he hunched in on himself. “I’m not someone you can plan a future with,” he said softly.

Jasmine reached out for Matt, her warm hands taking hold of his arms, covering the bloodstains. She wasn’t turning away, he realized.

“Do you know why I came here today?” she asked, and Matt shrugged miserably. “A couple was brought in last night from a horrible car accident.” She squeezed her eyes tightly shut just for a moment, as if she was blocking out the memory.

“Even though they were both so badly hurt and in so much pain,” she went on, “they were reaching out for each other’s hands. They were so worried about each other.” She looked at Matt, naked pleading in her eyes. “Bad things happen every day, just driving down the highway. And when they happen, I don’t want to be miles away from you. I want to be able to reach out for your hand.”

Matt started to speak again—God, yes, he wanted that, but how could he expect her to share this life?—and Jasmine put a hand over his mouth to shush him. “What you and your friends do, fighting monsters so that people like me, can live normal, happy lives? It’s so important. You kept who you really are a secret from me, and I understand why. But I want to know now. Matt, I want to be part of this. Please give me another chance.”

She swallowed hard and looked to him anxiously, her eyes bright with tears. Matt couldn’t even think. He just moved instinctively forward, taking Jasmine in his arms, resting his cheek against her head, smelling the sweet scent of her shampoo.

Jasmine had come back to him—and maybe, somehow, they would get through this dark time together.



Alaric and Zander had dug a grave down by the river, not far from the charred remains of the Plantation Museum. It was a lonely looking band who stood around it, Damon thought: Bonnie, his little redbird, clinging hard to the arm of her wolf boy; hunter Meredith looking bruised and wary, her hand tight in the hand of her scholar husband. Sturdy Matt, his head bowed and his eyes red, a girl Damon didn’t know standing quietly beside him.

And Elena, silent and withdrawn, the wind whipping her long blond hair around her shoulders. She was staring at nothing, her face swollen and tear-streaked.

Even like this, ravaged with grief, she was still beautiful, Damon thought. His gut tightened. How many times had he thought *If only Stefan were out of the way?* And now Stefan was gone and it was wrong, all wrong.

They'd wrapped Stefan's body in white silk and laid him carefully in the grave, his weapons around him. It was a beautiful spot they'd chosen, the river flowing past with a continual soothing sound of rushing water, moss-covered tree trunks rising up around them. A breeze fluttered the corner of the silk, its motion a parody of life, and Damon gritted his teeth. Everyone was waiting for someone else to begin Stefan's last rites.

Picking up a handful of dirt from the pile by the grave, he walked to the edge and let it trickle slowly from his fingers over Stefan's body, dark earth sullyng the clean white cloth. "It's a waste," he said, his voice hard and vicious to his own ears. "Stefan tried so hard; he worked and *worked* to not be a vampire, to fight who he had become. And he died still hating what he was." Damon opened his hand, letting the rest of the dirt spill into the grave.

They were looking at him with pity in their eyes, all of them, and Damon was suddenly furious. He didn't need their pity; he could destroy them with a touch, pull down this little town around them. He could fly away, leave them behind, and never look back.

But he could feel Elena's dull grief through the bond between them, and so he put out a hand to touch her arm, and stayed.

Bonnie stepped forward next. "Stefan was so brave," she said. "Even when Elena d-died"—she threw a look of panic at the others—"even when things were so bad for him, he came when I called him for help. He was a really good friend. He loved Elena and he tried to protect all of us. He *saved* us all, more than once." Her lip was wobbling dangerously, and Zander stepped up next to her, touching her arm in reassurance. "I don't want him to be alone," she went on, her voice thin and high. Taking a small white silk bag from her pocket, she held it over the grave. "This is filled with rosemary and sweet peas, for friendship, and remembrance. I won't forget Stefan." Bonnie let the silk bag fall into the grave, then took a handful of dirt and dropped it in.

"Werewolves and vampires are enemies," Zander said, staring down at Stefan's body, "but Stefan taught me that it's not so simple. He was a friend to the Pack." He dropped a handful of dirt into the grave, too, and he and Bonnie stepped back together, Bonnie leaning on him for support.

Meredith let her handful of dirt fall into the grave and gazed down at Stefan's body. "Stefan was good and strong, and he'd just defeated the last of the vampires he'd hunted for years," she said. "He was happy. When I fight

now, when I'm hunting the monsters that Stefan and I hunted together, I'll be fighting for him, too." She took a stake from her belt. "Stefan carved this," she said. "He hunted with it. He should have it." She dropped the stake in, and they all heard the soft thump as it hit the bottom of the grave.

As she turned away, Alaric stepped forward and looked to Damon. "I know they would have said a mass for the dead in Latin, when you and Stefan were young," he said hesitantly. "Even though he didn't go to church anymore, I thought maybe Stefan would have liked ..." He gestured shyly at the piece of paper clutched in one hand.

Damon shrugged. Maybe Stefan would have liked it; he didn't know. He was sure, though, that his brother would have listened politely to whatever Alaric planned to read.

Alaric unfolded the paper and began, "*Inclina, Domine, aurem tuam ad preces nostras quibus misericordiam tuam supplices deprecamur; ut animam famuli tui ...*" *Incline thy ear, O Lord, to the prayers with which we entreat Thy mercy, and in a place of peace and rest, establish the soul of Thy servant ...*

Damon felt his lips twist in a bitter smile at the familiar words. Alaric's accent was terrible. Even in the universities they didn't teach proper Latin anymore. And Damon was fairly certain that the fierce God he and Stefan had worshipped in their childhood would have no place of peace and rest for vampires. The Guardians had said, he remembered, that when a vampire died, he simply ceased to exist. Still, if the prayer comforted these children, let them have it.

Alaric finished reading the prayer, then carefully trickled a handful of dirt into Stefan's grave.

They were all looking at Elena now, but she just stood there, her lips pressed firmly together, and didn't step forward. She was *angry*, Damon sensed, her rage flowing through the bond that connected them.

Finally she raised her head and stared back at her friends. "No," she said sharply. "No, I won't say good-bye. I *do not accept this*." She was breathing hard, and Damon felt something flutter wildly through their bond. Elena was grieving and angry and in pain, but most of all, she was terrified, frightened of losing Stefan forever. Instinctively Damon stepped forward to wrap his arms around her, cradling her safely against his chest. Her heart was beating as fast as a bird's.

"You don't have to say good-bye, princess," he said. "Not if you don't want to. But you should tell him you love him."

Elena nodded. “Of course I do,” she said dully. “He knows that.” She pulled away from Damon, turning her back on the open grave, and walked down toward the river.

Damon looked to Alaric, Zander, and Matt. “Finish it,” he said. “She’s done.” Obediently, they picked up their shovels and began to fill in the grave. The first shovelful of earth hit the cloth around Stefan’s body with a dry, slithering sound that made Damon wince.

He followed Elena to the riverbank and stood next to her. She was staring silently down into the water, her jaw clenched tight, her hands curled into fists. Meredith, Bonnie, and Matt joined them. Bonnie linked her arm through Elena’s, and Meredith laid one hand on her shoulder, and Elena seemed to take some comfort in this.

Together, they listened to the river rushing past. After a while Bonnie said, in the puzzled voice of a hurt child, “I just don’t understand what happened.”

“Jack was a vampire,” Elena told her, her voice dull. “Why didn’t I know?”

“We should have—” Meredith began, but Damon cut her off.

“Jack was some new kind, made in a *lab*.” He felt his lip curl in distaste. “He didn’t have all the weaknesses our kind have.” He quickly explained what had happened—the business card, the lab, the research log. “He can disguise his aura, Elena. There’s no way you could have identified him. The vampires who hunted me and Katherine across Europe—he created them. He thinks he’s perfected the species, made the ultimate warriors. And now he wants to get rid of the all the existing vampires. Even Stefan.”

Elena made a small, hurt sound. They were all looking at Damon now, their eyes wide, and he knew what they were thinking.

Damon was next.

#TVD11Goodbye



The white lights were blinding. Meredith squinted against them and tried to struggle, but she couldn't move.

Just the dream, she told herself. Just the same dream. Things felt even more real this time: the lights brighter, the room less blurry around her. Her mouth was parched and sore. There was a sharp antiseptic smell in the air. She felt dizzy and nauseous.

It's only a dream, she reassured herself. I can get through this, and then I'll wake up safe in my own bed.

The shadowy figure moved at the edge of her vision, coming closer, and this time Meredith could see it more clearly than she ever had before. Gloved hands moving over her abdomen. A doctor in scrubs, looking down at her, face mask concealing his identity. She couldn't feel the hands moving, but she could see them. She was so numb, as if under a local anesthetic.

Carefully, the figure drew a vial of fluid into a needle, his surgical-gloved hands moving with calm precision. Meredith couldn't feel it as the needle slid into her arm, couldn't move away as the doctor pressed the plunger and the fluid slid into her veins. She arched her neck, shoving her head back against the table, flinching away as far as she could.

Although she couldn't feel the needle, the injection spread like fire across her body, her veins burning. A small, hurt gasp burst from her lips, and she tried again to get away. But she was trapped in place.

Wake up, wake up, she thought frantically.

The figure slid his mask away from his face—and beneath was Jack, his mouth quirking into a smile. Meredith whimpered, trying to push back into the table below her.

"Meredith," he said, running his hand across his face. "I thought that we

should talk.”

“This is a dream,” Meredith said defiantly, but her voice sounded small and scared.

Jack gave a short huff of laughter. “It isn’t a dream.” He reached, affectionately, to brush a loose hair away from her face. “When you told me you drank vervain tea every night, I knew how to get to you. I substituted a combination of the medications I’ve developed and a strong sedative for your tea. It made it easy to take you for treatments. I brought you here, and then I knocked you out again to take you home.”

“What?” Meredith asked. She was having trouble drawing breath; she was panting with fear. “What treatments? Why?”

“I’m making you like me. You’re perfect,” Jack told her, and Meredith shuddered, sickened. “Hunters are the best recruits, and you’re one hell of a hunter, Meredith. Smart and quick. Strong-willed, not like Trinity, who was so easy for that Old One to compel. You’ll make an amazing vampire. When I found out your brother had been a vampire, heard rumors about you almost being changed, well.” He shrugged and smiled at her, that lovely warm smile. “It seemed like it was meant to be. Together, we’ll be unstoppable.”

“No,” Meredith said, blinking back hot tears. “I’m not like you. I don’t want to be a vampire.”

Jack chuckled affectionately, his hand heavy on the crown of her head. “It’s not really your decision,” he said. “The transformation is almost complete.”

#TVD11RealityBites

* * *

“Do you think he’s really gone?” Elena asked, not looking at Damon. “I mean, I came back, and so did you.”

“I don’t know, Elena.” Damon sighed. “You came back because you weren’t supposed to die, because your time hadn’t passed yet. And I never should have come back. I just got lucky.”

They were together on the apartment’s balcony, where Stefan had liked to go to think and keep watch. The late summer smell of roses was too heavy, sickly sweet and oppressive. Elena’s eyes were sore, and she rubbed at them. She was so tired of crying.

Damon lounged against the rail beside her, seeming perfectly relaxed. He had the gift of being completely still when he wanted to, without twitching and shuffling his feet like most people seemed to. It was restful to be around

him, she thought. He was watching her closely, his black eyes hooded, and Elena couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"When Stefan and I were children, a long time ago," Damon said suddenly, "he was so serious. Unlike me, he tried to do the right thing. He was my father's good boy, and I hated him for it. He'd cover for me, though, try to protect me from my father and the punishments I always deserved." He grimaced, a small twitch of his lips. "Stefan would get a beating for lying to protect me. I never even thanked him."

"You were children," she said gently.

"Protecting me always got Stefan hurt," Damon went on, as if he hadn't heard her. "We fought and we were apart for centuries. Without him, I lost myself."

Elena took his hand. He felt so cold, and she rubbed her hands against his to warm it. "I was lost, too," she said. "After my parents died, I didn't really care about anything. I wanted to be the queen of the school, but it was just pride keeping me going. Stefan ... Stefan was the first person to really see me, to find who I was under what I wanted everyone to see." She felt herself tearing up again, and she pressed her face against her and Damon's clasped hands, so that he wouldn't see her cry. "I'm worried I'm going to get lost again."

"I'm not going to leave you this time," Damon told her. "If nothing else, I can look after you for Stefan." His lips twisted in a wry little grin. "Not that you really need looking after."

"We can look after each other," Elena said. She was glad he was staying; there was a comfort in Damon's presence, although it didn't fill up the void that seemed to be growing inside her. Without Stefan, she felt so alone, one floating speck in a dark and empty universe. But Damon was alone, too, and right now they needed each other.

"And there's another reason I need to stay," Damon said, a new sharpness in his tone. Elena looked up at him, her attention caught. "Vengeance." He gripped her hand tighter, and she squeezed back in response. "Jack? The vampires he's created? We have to make them all pay."

The dark emptiness within Elena slowly heated and began to burn. She might be lost and alone, but, if she could get revenge for Stefan's death, her life would have purpose.

"Yes," she told him, nodding. "Vengeance."

Look out for #TVD12Unspoken

About the Author



L. J. Smith has written a number of bestselling books and series for young adults, including *The Vampire Diaries* (now a hit TV show), *The Secret Circle*, *The Forbidden Game*, *Night World*, and the New York Times #1 bestselling *Dark Visions*. She is happiest sitting by a crackling fire in a cabin in Point Reyes, California, or walking the beaches that surround that area. She loves to hear from readers and hopes they will visit her updated website at www.ljanesmith.net.

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Smith

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VOL. 2

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The
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THE SALVATION

VOL. 2

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47NORTH

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The Vampire Diaries

A Note About the Hashtags in This Book

Elena's diary may be private, but this book doesn't have to be.

Everyone's talking about the biggest shockers, twists, and swoon-worthy moments.

Look for the hashtags throughout this book and share your own reactions on Twitter. To connect with other readers right now, tag your tweets with [#TVD12](#).



Meredith desperately struggled against the metal restraints binding her arms and legs to the operating table. She closed her eyes, straining her muscles, adrenaline surging through her, but the restraints wouldn't budge.

"Please," she begged, hot tears running down her cheeks.

Jack ignored her pleas, focusing intently on her neck as he slowly slid a hypodermic needle beneath her skin.

"Almost done," he said, depressing the plunger. Meredith's neck was too numb to feel the needle, but the injection burned as it spread through her veins. She gasped and tried once more to rip her arm away from her captor.

Jack's eyes were on hers as she writhed. The same warm hazel eyes as they'd been when Meredith had thought of him as a mentor, as one of the best hunters she'd ever met. Before she knew Jack was a vampire. Before he had murdered Stefan.

Before she'd known he was *changing* her.

"I don't want to be a vampire," she whispered, her voice shaking. Her eyes blurred with tears. Meredith thought of Cristian, the vampire brother she'd had to kill, of the generations of her family whose life mission had been to destroy the supernatural race. She *couldn't* become one of the enemy, not after everything she'd been through.

A brief smile crossed Jack's face, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "It's done."

Meredith ached everywhere. She began to shake her head slowly, back and forth, as her breath came in ragged, anxious spurts. "I'll kill myself," she said desperately.

Jack grinned more widely. "Go ahead and try," he said. "I've perfected the treatments. We're unkillable."

With a fresh flare of panic, Meredith again slammed her arms and legs against the restraints. The heavy, numb feeling was fading, and metal bit

sharply into her wrists. In a burst of effort, she snapped the metal bands and was free. Meredith tumbled off the operating table and, still shaky on her feet, hit the floor hard.

On her hands and knees, she scrabbled for the door, expecting Jack to hoist her back onto the table at any moment. But Jack didn't make a move toward her, just watched as she struggled. She could hear herself breathing, a harsh, desperate panting, as she pulled herself across the floor. She just needed to get *out*.

She made it to the door and pulled herself up, hanging onto the knob.

"You'll be back," Jack said, his voice an eerie calm.

Wrenching the door open, Meredith burst through and ran as fast as she could, stumbling through the hall. It was long and fluorescent-lit, the floors dark gray tile like those of a hospital or a school. She listened for Jack's footsteps in the hall behind her, but there was only his laughter, bubbling maniacally, from the room she had left behind.

"You'll be back," he called again. "You won't be able to help it."

Not letting herself think of anything but escape, Meredith looked around frantically. Double doors at the end of the hall led toward a stairway, and she pushed through, her feet slapping at the concrete stairs, heading down and—she hoped—out.

The stairs seemed to go on forever. Finally, she burst through another set of double doors and onto the sidewalk. She paused for a moment, gasping for breath as she gazed around. Office buildings stretched behind her. She had no idea where she was. It was still dark out, but the sky was beginning to lighten toward gray.

Everything in her was screaming, *get away*, her heart still hammering in panic. What if Jack's fierce, invulnerable vampires were nearby? Meredith pressed her back against the cold brick wall of the building behind her, trying to conceal herself in the darkness, and looked around cautiously. No one.

She sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm her pounding heart. There'd be no sense in running at random. She clenched her fists and deliberately relaxed, forcing the tension out of her body. She was steadier on her feet now, her arms and legs tingling as the numbness wore off. There was no one in sight. To her left, Meredith heard the sound of cars racing past on a highway. She headed in that direction, ready to find her way home.



Dawn was breaking as Meredith opened the door to her apartment and walked quietly through the entryway, dropping her keys on the table. *I'm all right now*, she told herself. Jack had said she was a vampire, but Meredith didn't feel any different. Maybe the treatment didn't take.

She took a deep breath as she glanced around her familiar bedroom. Early morning light was beginning to come through the curtained windows, and everything seemed comfortingly ordinary. Her law books were lined up on the shelf across from the bed, her and Alaric's wedding picture stood on top of her bureau. Without even bothering to take off her clothes, Meredith pulled back the cool sheets and slipped into bed. Next to her, Alaric muttered something in his sleep and burrowed deeper into the pillows.

She was safe. Everything was terrible: Stefan was dead, Jack was a vampire, but the worst hadn't happened. *I'm fine*, she told herself.

Experimentally, she ran a finger across her teeth. Normal. No extra-sharp canines. Her hands were warm, her heart was beating at a quick, human rate. She was *fine*. Her body must have fought off whatever Jack had tried to do.

She shifted closer to Alaric, then frowned. There was something in her jeans pocket. She reached inside, and her fingers closed around a thin cardboard rectangle. A business card. Meredith squinted as she pulled it out and held it up to catch the dim morning light. Printed on the card was an infinity symbol in black type and a company name: *Lifetime Solutions*. Below that, handwritten in black ink, a phone number.

Jack had been pretty sure of himself, she thought angrily. She tightened her fingers around the card, crumpling it a little, before shoving it into the drawer of her bedside table. She didn't ever want to see Jack again.

According to her clock, it wasn't even five A.M. yet. Meredith took another deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to relax into sleep, trying to forget Jack's face as he slid the final needle into her arm.

Her bed was soft, and the sheets smelled faintly of detergent. There was another smell, too. Something... salty. Slightly metallic. Meredith frowned a little, trying to identify it.

Gradually, she became aware of a sound as well. All around her came a slow, regular rushing that reminded her of the ocean, a deep, slow thudding beneath the steady sound of the surf. Breathing in time with the sounds, Meredith sank deeper into almost-sleep.

Something kept tugging at the edges of her attention, though, sharpening her appetite. Without conscious intent, she licked her lips. That salty, metallic smell... there was something about it more delicious than the roasted chicken her mother made, sweeter than fresh-baked apple pie. So familiar, somehow, and yet she couldn't quite place it.

Meredith's mouth was watering hungrily when something suddenly *shifted* in her jaw. In surprise, her hands flew to her mouth.

Her jaw moved again. Tentatively, she touched her lips. They were so sensitive, she winced at the pain-pleasure when her careful fingers met her teeth. More cautiously, she touched again.

Her canines were long and sharp. *Fangs*.

The rushing, thudding sound, the smell of salt and something else—copper—was almost overwhelming. With each thud, her stomach ached and her teeth ached.

It was Alaric. She was hearing Alaric's heart beating. She was smelling Alaric's blood.

Horried, Meredith scrambled out of bed. She stared down at Alaric below her, so peaceful and oblivious.

Jack had done it. He'd turned her into a vampire.

And she was *famished*.

[#TVD12HungerGames](#)



Dear Diary,

I've lost everything. I've lost myself.

I don't know who I am without Stefan.

For days now, I haven't been able to write in here. I felt like, if I wrote down everything that's happened, it would make it real.

But it is real, whether I write it down or not.

Stefan is dead.

Elena pulled her hands away from her laptop as if it had burned her, then pressed her fingers tightly against her mouth. Stefan was *dead*. Her eyes filled with hot tears, and she roughly wiped them away. All she'd done lately was cry, and it wasn't making anything better.

It seems like the earth should have stopped turning. If Stefan is dead, the sun shouldn't rise in the morning. But time passes and every day, there's a new day. Except it means nothing to me, because Stefan is still dead.

We all trusted Jack. He and Stefan hunted side by side, tracking down one of the Old ones, Solomon. But while we were all celebrating Solomon's defeat, feeling happy and safe at last, Jack plunged his stave through Stefan's heart. Jack killed him.

Elena stopped typing again and rested her head in her hands, remembering. Stefan's eyes had met Elena's, and he'd given her a soft smile. She'd known that they were both thinking the same thing: *Now that the Old Ones are gone, our real life together can begin.*

It had all happened so fast. Elena had *seen* that something was wrong, but before she could shout a warning, Jack had thrust his stave through Stefan's heart. She'd been too late.

The smile had faded from Stefan's face as his eyes widened. For just a moment, he'd looked innocently surprised, and then Stefan had simply gone

blank. His eyes—those leaf-green eyes that had looked at her with such love—lost focus. His body crumpled to the floor, but Stefan was already gone.

It was true that Jack was hunting the Old Ones, just as we were. But he didn't want to make the world safer. Jack had created a new kind of vampire through drugs and surgeries instead of blood and magic. The vampires Jack made are terrifying: immune to sunlight and vervain and, according to Damon, impossible to kill by any of the usual methods.

Jack didn't want any competition for his lab-created race of vampires. So he set out to eliminate the most dangerous vampires, the oldest ones. Not just the ancient Old Ones, but also the clever, long-lived vampires who have lasted a few centuries. Vampires like Katherine and Damon. Like Stefan.

Jack used us all—my Guardian Power, Stefan and Meredith's fighting ability, Bonnie's magic—as weapons against Solomon. The Old One was too well hidden for Jack to find on his own. But once Solomon was dead, Stefan was just another obstacle in Jack's way.

We don't know where Jack is now, or what he's planning next. The hunters who traveled with him—Trinity, Darlene, and Alex—were as fooled by him as we were. They've left town, trying to track Jack. But they haven't got a clue where he might be.

Elena swallowed hard and wiped her eyes again with the sleeve of her bathrobe.

Meredith and Damon don't think Jack's really gone at all. A few days ago, Meredith fought one of his strange synthetic vampires. The vampire escaped, and Meredith barely survived. Is Jack continuing his experiments here in Dalcrest?

I should care. I should want vengeance. But instead, I'm numb.

Without Stefan, it's like I'm dead, too.

* * *

A key rattled in the lock of the front door, and Elena looked up from her computer screen to see Damon coming in. The cold apartment warmed a bit, as if the sleek, dark-haired vampire had brought some of the late summer breeze into the air-conditioned room. He seemed to get smaller as he came in, though, hunching his shoulders. Through the bond between them, Elena sensed his wistful ache at finding himself once again surrounded by Stefan's possessions, resenting the reminder that his brother was gone.

"You've been feeding," she commented, looking at the near-human

flush of his cheeks.

“If you want to call it that.” Damon curled his lip in disgust. “Stefan’s animal diet is utterly vile, just as I always suspected.”

Elena flinched, and Damon glanced up, his face falling. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know I shouldn’t—” She could see her own pain at the mention of Stefan reflected in his eyes.

“It’s okay,” she said, shaking her head hard. “You should be able to say his name, he’s your brother. I just—” Tears were rising up in her eyes again, and she willed them back. She needed to stop crying.

Damon took her hand, his fingers cool and smooth. “I promise you that Jack will pay,” he said quietly, his eyes as dark as night. “Whatever it takes.”

A wave of panic hit Elena, knocking the breath out of her, and she clutched Damon’s hand between hers. “No,” she said. “Damon, you have to be careful. Even if it means letting Jack go.”

Damon stiffened, his dark eyes fixed on hers. “We promised each other we would take vengeance on Jack,” he said firmly. “We owe it to Stefan.”

Elena shook her head. “I can’t lose you, too.” She hated the weak waver in her voice, but she straightened her shoulders and looked at Damon levelly, her face resolute. Sometimes it felt like Damon’s presence was the thin barrier between her and madness. Damon was the only one who understood, who’d really loved Stefan as deeply as she had.

Every night, she heard Damon’s soft footfalls pacing through the apartment, living room to kitchen to hall, hesitating sometimes outside her bedroom but never coming in, even when she yearned for his comfort. Guarding her as he wandered, and also pacing out the slow beats of his own sorrow, unable to settle. The thought of Damon falling like Stefan had, his handsome face suddenly blank and still, made Elena’s heart pound frantically. “Please, Damon,” she begged.

His eyes softening, Damon sighed and brushed a finger gently over her knuckles, then pulled his hand back quickly, his jaw tightening. “I won’t do anything foolish. Remember, I’m good at taking care of myself.”

Elena started to nod gratefully, then paused as she thought through what he’d said. He hadn’t promised to stay out of danger, not really. “You can’t kill anyone,” she reminded him stubbornly. “The Guardians told you, if you kill anyone, I’ll die. So there’s not much point in looking for revenge.”

Damon smiled without humor, his features sharp. “Vampires aren’t human,” he said. “I *can* kill Jack, and I will.”

Elena let go of his hand. Damon would never stop hunting Jack.

Damon would die on this hunt, she was sure of it. And then Elena would truly have nothing.



Damon paced across Elena's living room, glaring at the afternoon sunlight stretching through the windows and across the floor. When he'd woken from his restless sleep an hour earlier, the apartment had already been empty.

Brushing his fingers across his chest absently, he let Elena's emotions thrum through the bond between them. Nothing had changed; he still felt the same sharp, angry grief that had brought him back to Dalcrest, that had let him know his brother was dead. But nothing new. Wherever Elena had gone, she wasn't in danger.

He ached to be out hunting Jack, to find him and tear him apart. Rage burned under his skin—how *dare* anyone touch his little brother. Even when he and Stefan had hated each other, no one else had been allowed to hurt him.

But for now, Damon was keeping a low profile, guarding Elena, waiting for the right time.

Meredith had tried laying down the law to him after Stefan's funeral. "As far as Jack knows, you're still in Europe," she'd said. "We need to keep it that way. You might be the best weapon we've got."

Every line of the gray-eyed hunter's body had been tense with irritation at having to ask Damon for something; and under other circumstances, this would have amused him. Meredith had no right to tell him what to do, and he had no reason to do what she asked.

But then Elena, with a desperate pleading look in her eyes, had said, "Please, Damon. I can't lose you, too." And Damon had agreed to do whatever she wanted.

He sighed and sat down on the couch, glancing around. He was beginning to loathe this room, pretty as it was, with its heavy antique furniture and art on the walls. It was decorated to Stefan's taste: dark, traditional, cozy. Stefan's taste, Stefan's possessions, Stefan's Elena.

On the table beside the couch lay a thick notebook bound in brown leather: Jack's journal, the record of the series of experiments he had done to

create his new race of vampires. Damon had found it when he'd infiltrated Jack's company in Switzerland.

Near the end was a list of vampires Jack had destroyed—and a list of those he still planned to hunt down. Damon picked up the journal and turned to the long column of names. Many were vampires Damon had known over the years, their names scratched through. Near the bottom of the page, three names, not yet crossed out: *Katherine von Swartzchild. Damon Salvatore. Stefan Salvatore.*

Damon traced the names lightly with his finger, remembering how Katherine's face had paled as her life ebbed away. He felt again the sudden spike of anguished horror from Elena that had told him Stefan was dead. At least Damon had stolen the book before Jack had the opportunity to cross out their names.

Clenching his jaw, he flipped forward through its pages again. If he couldn't just go out and hunt Jack down—yet—he could still look for clues on how to defeat him.

But there was nothing new written here. He'd gone through it dozens of times. After a few minutes, he groaned softly and closed his eyes, bringing a hand up to rub his temples.

There was plenty about the weaknesses of Jack's creations, true. But the journal was a record of how Jack had overcome those flaws. Sunlight, fire, decapitation, stake to the heart: As far as Damon could tell, there was no way to kill these manmade vampires.

It was hopeless. Maybe Damon should give up, do what Elena wanted and hide.

No. His eyes snapped open and he gritted his teeth. He was *Damon Salvatore*. No mad scientist was going to defeat *him*.

He snapped the book closed. Any true danger to these manufactured vampires would have to be something Jack hadn't thought of.

Almost unwillingly, Damon let his gaze travel to the heavy mahogany cabinet against the wall. Stefan's talismans sat on top of it, a collection of objects from his long life. Coins, a stone cup, a watch. An apricot hair ribbon of Elena's, acquired before Stefan had even really known her, before Damon had known her at all. *What would have been different, Damon wondered, if he had been the one to meet Elena first?*

Damon stood and went slowly over to the cabinet, where he touched the

things lightly: iron box, golden coins, ivory dagger, silken ribbon.

Damon didn't hang on to things the way Stefan had. He never saw the point of keeping objects he'd outgrown, dragging his past around the world with him.

Stefan had carried their past for him, he realized. The thought gave him a hollow feeling in his chest. With Stefan and Katherine both dead, there was no one left now who remembered Damon when he had been alive.

He drew one finger along the blade of the ivory-handled dagger and pulled his hand back with a hiss. Stefan had kept it sharp, although it had probably been centuries since he'd used it.

Their father had carried this dagger for years, Damon remembered, hanging in a sheath at his belt. A beautiful object, its fine glossy hilt curving above a well-cut, and useful, blade. He had given it to Stefan for his fifteenth birthday.

"Every gentleman should wear one," Giuseppe Salvatore had said, grasping his younger son's shoulder affectionately. "Not for aggression or fighting in the streets like a peasant—" Damon had felt his father's sidelong gaze light upon him, and hadn't that been as pointed as the dagger itself? "—but in case you need it. This blade is forged of the finest steel. It's served me well."

Stefan's green eyes had shone as he looked up at their father. "Thank you, Father," he'd said. "I'll treasure it."

Lounging elegantly beside them, left out of the moment between his father and little brother, Damon had touched his own quite beautiful bone-handled dagger, and his mouth had suddenly filled with bitterness.

He blinked the memory away. He'd wasted a lot of time resenting Stefan, his sweet-faced tagalong of a baby brother.

He was wasting time *now*. Damon's slow heart thumped hard, the hollow ache in his chest increasing. His earnest, loving, irritating little brother was gone. Murdered. And Damon was cowering in the shadows? His face twisted in disgust. He could imagine what their father would have said about that.

In one smooth motion, he scooped up the dagger and headed for the door. He would keep his promise to Elena; he would be careful. But he wasn't going to hide, not anymore. Damon was a Salvatore—the last of the Salvatores, now—and that meant he wasn't afraid of anything.

It was time to take control of the fight. And the first thing he needed to do was to figure out where Jack might be hiding.

[#TVD12TheLastSalvatore](#)

* * *

The river lapped gently against the small stones on its bank, sunlight glinting off its ripples. Elena instinctively moved deeper into the shade of one of the moss-covered trees by the riverside.

The rectangle of earth that marked Stefan's grave still stood out clearly. There hadn't been time yet for the soil to harden, for the grass to grow over it and erase where they'd blanketed Stefan with dirt.

It hadn't been long at all since Stefan had been alive.

A wave of anguish washed over Elena, and she dropped to her knees by the graveside. Reaching out, she placed a gentle hand on the recently turned earth.

She wanted to say something, to tell him how much she missed him, but when she opened her mouth, all that came out was his name. "Stefan," she said miserably, her voice catching in her throat. "Oh, *Stefan*."

Just a couple of weeks ago, they'd been together. Not long before that, he had surprised her with the key to her old home—he'd bought the house that she'd grown up in from her Aunt Judith. "We're going to go everywhere," he'd told her, his hands strong and steady around hers. "But we'll always have this to come home to."

It turned out *always* lasted less than a week after that. They hadn't even had time to visit the house together. Elena dug her fingers deep into the dirt, trying not to think about Stefan's body six feet below.

"Elena?"

Bonnie came forward from the trees. Elena pulled her hands away from Stefan's grave. It seemed too intimate a gesture to let anyone see it, even Bonnie. "Thank you for coming," she said quietly, rising to her feet.

"Of course." Bonnie's brown eyes were huge and anxious. She stepped forward and pulled Elena into a hug. "How are you doing? We've been—Zander and I wanted to know if there was any way we could help you."

"Actually, I think there is," Elena told her. She took Bonnie's hand in her own and led her over to Stefan's grave.

"I keep expecting him to show up," Bonnie admitted, her eyes fixed on

the grave. “It’s hard to believe he’s gone, y’know?”

No, Elena didn’t know. From the moment she woke up in the morning until she finally tossed and turned her way into a restless sleep, she couldn’t forget that Stefan was gone. His absence even followed her into her dreams. She didn’t say that, though, just moved a little closer to Bonnie, as if she could shelter in her friend’s warmth.

“Remember how you talked to me after I died?” Elena asked, squeezing Bonnie’s hand in hers.

Tearing her eyes away from the ground, Bonnie looked back up at Elena. “Oh, Elena, I don’t think—”

“You managed to bring Stefan to see me,” Elena went on doggedly, holding tight to her friend’s arm.

Bonnie tried to pull away. “But you weren’t supposed to be dead! Klaus had you in some kind of halfway place—you were a prisoner, not dead-dead.” She hesitated, and then asked in a low voice, “And do you remember how the Guardians said vampires just... end?”

“It’s worth a try, though, isn’t it?” Elena said quickly. “Guardians don’t know everything, we’ve proved that before. If you could help me to see him, Bonnie...” She was holding on to Bonnie too tightly, she realized, and forced her hands to relax. “Please,” she added quietly.

Bonnie chewed her lip. Elena could feel the moment when she gave in, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t want you to be hurt any more than you already are,” Bonnie said quietly.

“We have to try,” Elena insisted.

Bonnie hesitated, then finally nodded. “Okay.” She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully and stepped toward the river, pulling Elena along with her. “When I did it for Stefan, I went into a trance and made contact with you, then brought him in. But I think maybe we’ll have to try something different.”

Their feet crunched over the rocky sand as Bonnie pulled Elena with her to the very edge of the river. Water lapped against their sneakers, soaking through the fabric and chilling Elena’s toes.

“I want you to let me use your Power,” Bonnie said, squeezing Elena’s hand. “It’ll help me search for Stefan. When I communicated with you, you came to me first, so I knew how to find you. I imagine he’ll be hard to find.”

“Of course,” Elena said.

She held tightly to Bonnie's hand and tried to channel her own Power into her friend. Taking a deep, slow breath, Elena forced herself to relax until, out of the corners of her eyes, she began to see her own golden aura. It was dulled with gray patches of grief, but still stretched wide around her, entwining with the rose-pink of Bonnie's aura.

Bonnie took a deep breath of her own and fixed her eyes on the patterns of the sunlight reflecting off the water. "Just as good as a candle for focusing," she said absently. Elena watched as Bonnie's small face became intent, her pupils as wide as a cat's. Elena closed her own eyes.

Darkness. But ahead of her, a glimmer of rose and gold. Bonnie's aura entwined with her own, leading her on. Bonnie's small figure, very straight and determined, walked swiftly into the distance.

Elena hurried after her, her chest tight with excitement. She would see Stefan again. She could tell him how hard it was without him, every day, and he would hold her in his arms and comfort her. It would be like coming home.

They walked on into the darkness, the light of their auras surrounding them both. But then, slowly, the glow of their entwined auras began to fade. Elena called out, but her voice stuck in her throat. Where was Bonnie? Elena tried to run after her, but her friend grew smaller and smaller, finally disappearing from view.

Elena stopped, half-sobbing.

"Stefan!" she called. Her voice echoed back to her. "*Stefan!*"

She was alone in the darkness.

Elena's eyes fluttered open. She was standing on the riverbank, her toes chilled by the lapping waves. Bonnie blinked up at her, her face pale and wet with tears.

"I'm so sorry, Elena," she said. "I couldn't find him. He's not anywhere we can reach."

Elena leaned into her friend, letting Bonnie's arms circle her shoulders, and sobbed.

* * *

Bonnie felt terrible. As she toed off her damp sneakers in the entryway of her and Zander's apartment, she sniffled experimentally. Maybe spending the afternoon at the river had given her a cold. That would be an easy explanation for the rotten, hollow sensation in her chest.

But, no, if Bonnie was honest with herself, she had to admit the feeling was guilt. The first thing Elena had asked her for since Stefan had died—the *only* thing Elena had asked anybody for at all—and Bonnie couldn't do it.

Remembering Elena's strained smile when she thanked her for trying, Bonnie almost tripped over Zander's mud-caked work boots, catching herself with a hand against the wall. Now, the end of summer, was the time when his landscaping business planted shrubs and trees, and every day he came home absolutely filthy.

That was what Bonnie needed. Zander. He'd pull her into his arms, smelling of grass and sunshine, and tell that it was okay, that she'd done the best she could.

She heard Zander's voice and followed his low tones to the kitchen. As she turned the corner from the hallway, she stopped for a moment to simply look at him. He was standing with his back to her, all long lean muscles and tanned skin, his moonlight-blond hair curling at the nape of his neck, still damp with sweat. They'd been together for years now, but the sight of him still sometimes made her want to melt into a puddle on the floor.

"I *know*," he said sharply into the phone. "I'm not changing my mind."

"Hey," she whispered, stepping forward and lightly brushing her fingers across his back. Zander jumped.

"Bonnie's here," he said tightly, turning around to face her. "I have to go. I'll call you later." He clicked the phone off.

"Who was that?" Bonnie asked, leaning forward for a kiss. Zander's lips met hers, warm and soft. When he pulled away, though, he avoided her eyes.

"No one important," he said. "You want pizza for dinner? Jared told me the secret of that crust he makes. Cornmeal."

"Sounds good," Bonnie said, but she couldn't help frowning. "Are you okay?"

Zander looked at her then, and his face split into a smile, his sky-blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "Never better," he said.

"Okay." Bonnie smiled back tentatively. Zander's gaze had skidded away from hers again, and his shoulders were stiff.

She pushed away the tickle of worry at the back of her mind. They'd all been tense since Stefan's death. There was nothing more to it than that.

Thinking of Stefan, Bonnie sighed, and Zander turned back toward her,

instantly alert. “What’s up?” he asked, his face full of concern.

“I tried to contact Stefan today so Elena could say good-bye. But I couldn’t find him.”

“Oh, Bonnie,” he said. And just as she’d known he would, he put an arm around her shoulders. Bonnie automatically snuggled into it, taking comfort in his strength. “She knows you did everything you could,” Zander went on reassuringly. “There’s nothing you wouldn’t do for her.”

But Elena had looked so broken, Bonnie thought. Nothing like the proud girl Bonnie had known since they were kids. Elena loved Stefan with everything she had, and now she was left with nothing.

Bonnie shivered and cuddled against Zander. “I love you,” she told him. Without a word, Zander pulled her even closer.



The sun was just beginning to sink behind Dalcrest's science lab, sending long golden rays across the college's lawns. On the branch of a maple tree overhanging the path, a large crow stretched out its glossy blue-black wings. Its gaze was fixed intently on the side entrance to the lab.

Damon shifted his talons along the branch, then smoothed an errant feather with his beak. He'd been searching Dalcrest all day, in both crow and human form.

Assuming that Jack was using medical facilities to get the supplies he needed to create his monstrosities, there were a limited number of possible locations in town. There had been no sign of Jack at the busy hospital or the quieter medical practices, most closed for the weekend. So now Damon was at campus, staking out the Dalcrest science lab. It was a long shot, he figured, that Jack would still be this close to where he was last seen, but he had to try. Stefan was *dead*, and all Damon could think of right now was finding the monster who'd killed him.

The campus was deserted; it was the time of year when the summer students had finally gone home and the professors hadn't yet begun to prepare for their fall classes. But now a stocky, dark-haired man was coming out of the science lab, and Damon straightened on his branch. The man, who was wearing a pack on his back and carrying a large box, fit the description he'd gotten of Jack—right coloring, build, age—although probably a hundred other humans in Dalcrest would fit the same description. Clicking his beak thoughtfully, Damon sent out a tendril of Power to see if he could find anything that suggested the man was other than human.

Was there the tiniest shift in his aura? These vampires had learned to shield themselves, to appear human so as not to alert their prey. But here he would think he was alone, no one watching him but a bird in a tree. Now that Damon was concentrating his attention fully on this man, there seemed to be something not quite natural, something *wrong* shimmering through his protective mask. Damon spread his wings wide. *Got you now*, he thought, rather smugly, as he fluttered quietly down onto the path behind the man,

shifting to his own form as he landed.

Damon's perfectly polished black boots hit the path without a sound, but Jack whipped around immediately. *Definitely a vampire.*

"Hello," Damon said, giving a blindingly bright smile. Jack's face twitched in confusion, and Damon attacked, knocking him to the ground and sending the box flying out of Jack's hands. "We haven't met," he growled, pinning Jack's shoulders hard against the path. "But I hear you've been looking for me."

Fangs extending, Damon tore at the other vampire's throat. There had to be some way to kill him. If there was one thing Damon knew for certain, it was that every being, natural or supernatural, had a weakness. You just had to know how to find it.

Maybe if he could get Jack's head off fast enough that the other vampire couldn't heal... Blood filled his mouth, acidic and chemical, and Damon spat it to the side, grimacing. With a grunt of effort, Jack managed to flip Damon off, and they were both on their feet in an instant, circling each other. Jack fumbled at his side and pulled a stake from his pocket.

Damon wasn't worried. He had a weapon of his own. Eyeing Jack, he drew Stefan's ivory-handled dagger—his dagger, now—and held it guardedly, his arms spread. The dagger was poised to strike in his right hand, his left hand open and ready to grapple with his opponent. Usually he preferred to rely on his own hands and teeth in a fight, but using Stefan's dagger seemed fitting. The lessons of dagger fighting he'd learned centuries earlier all came back to him now.

Watching Jack carefully, Damon waited for an opening. He was pretty sure he could take the false vampire. The vampires who had hunted Damon, who had killed Katherine, had been strong and fast, but no faster or stronger than Damon and Katherine. The problem had been that there were too many of them, and that they didn't stay dead. Jack by himself should be easy.

Damon feinted to the left. Jack flinched, and Damon moved in on the right, slashing a deep cut along Jack's stomach. Jack growled, a low, animal sound, and thrust his stake toward Damon's heart. He missed, and it sank into Damon's shoulder instead, tearing a gaping wound in his flesh.

Sucking in a shocked breath, Damon stumbled for a second before he caught himself. Jack quickly stabbed him again with the stake, this time in the side. Twisting, Damon slashed down, cutting a long bloody stripe along Jack's leg. They grappled hand-to-hand for a moment, both breathing hard,

then shoved apart, coming to a halt a few feet from each other.

“Damon Salvatore,” Jack said, smiling as if they were friends. “You’re the clever brother, aren’t you? Not like Stefan.”

Damon suppressed the hot flare of rage that rose up at his brother’s name. It wouldn’t do him any good to get angry now. He had to keep cool if he was going to defeat Jack. He was stronger than Damon had thought he would be, stronger than the other manmade vampires Damon had fought. A trickle of blood ran down Damon’s side, and he realized his shirt was soaked with it. Blood was pulsing from the wounds the stake had left in him even as his flesh began to try to knit itself together.

Jack’s clothes were ruined, too, but Damon saw that beneath the slashed fabric his skin was already whole again. He healed as fast as his minions had.

Damon leaped at Jack, moving before the other vampire could prepare, and sank his fangs into one side of Jack’s throat. Not delicately, as he did while feeding, but with a rough, tearing bite. He worked his teeth against one side of Jack’s throat as he brought his dagger up to stab repeatedly at the other, ripping the dagger from side to side. If he could do *enough* damage...

But there was more resistance than there should be to his bite and the dagger’s thrust. Jack’s skin was thicker and stronger than a human’s—or even an ordinary vampire’s. Damon shook with a sudden shock as Jack sank the stake into him again, through the back this time. The tip grated painfully on one of Damon’s ribs. He ripped more fiercely at Jack’s throat, but Jack’s next blow knocked the wind out of him.

Letting go of Jack, Damon staggered backward. He wiped at his mouth with the back of one hand and realized blood—his own blood—was running down his chin. He coughed and choked again.

Jack must have nicked Damon’s lung. He needed time to heal before he could fight again; he needed to feed.

“Huh. Maybe not the clever brother after all,” Jack said. The wounds on his neck had already closed, Damon saw with dismay.

Damon backed up a few steps, keeping his eyes on Jack, who moved closer. A bubble of blood rose in Damon’s throat and he spat, staining the path with a blossom of bright red. There was a wall behind him, he realized. Jack was blocking him in.

Jack swung the pack off his back and reached inside, pulling something out. Something metal, with a grip and a nozzle—

A flamethrower? Damon drew on his last reserves of strength and leaped to one side, the flames so close he felt them scorch his jeans.

“Thoughtful of you to come right to me,” Jack said, aiming the flamethrower again. “I assumed you were still in Paris.”

Damon gathered his last vestiges of energy to dodge again. *Like a rat in a trap*, he thought dimly. He tried to tense for another leap, but his body gave out and he staggered to the side, his legs collapsing underneath him. Black spots danced before his eyes. His mouth was full of blood.

Jack gripped the nozzle of the flamethrower in both hands and lifted it up, taking aim—and then, suddenly, flew backward. Like a rag doll shot by a slingshot, he sailed through the air, hitting the side of the building behind him with a satisfying crunch. He slid into the grass, a limp, broken form.

Damon blinked in dazed shock. After a moment, he thought to look behind him.

Over the top of the hill behind the science building, Elena appeared, her face coldly ferocious, her Guardian Powers clearly in full force. “My hero,” Damon muttered wryly, and his knees buckled.



Damon blinked back to full consciousness and found himself lying propped up against the trunk of a tree, Elena’s arms around him. She smelled sweet and her skin was soft; Damon let himself luxuriate in lying next to her for a moment before he licked the blood away from his lips and coughed.

“Are you all right?” Elena asked as he tried to sit up.

“Not particularly,” Damon said weakly, and patted along his chest. The wounds were only half-closed, and he was still bleeding. He couldn’t breathe properly. “Where’s Jack?”

“He got away while I was helping you,” Elena admitted.

“Next time, then.” Damon coughed again, wincing.

“What were you *thinking*, Damon?” In contrast to her stern words, her hands stroking his hair were gentle, and her face was creased with concern. “You promised to be careful, and then you go chasing after Jack.”

Damon squinted up at her. “I had my reasons,” he said. He couldn’t talk about how hard it was to do *nothing* when Stefan was dead. Anyway, Elena knew. She could feel it through their connection; he didn’t have the strength to hide his thoughts from her right now.

“We’ll talk later,” Elena said. “First, we need to get you back on your feet.” Damon coughed again, and her eyes widened at the spatter of blood that came from his mouth. “You need to feed,” she said instantly, pulling her hair aside. “Here.”

She smelled so good, the blood pulsing beneath her skin less than an inch from his lips. Damon recalled clearly how sweet and rich Elena’s blood had always been—the best he’d ever tasted, something special. He could imagine gulping it down, feeling it heal his wounds and fill him with warmth and Power.

Still, he hesitated. She was his brother’s, bound to Stefan now by death even more securely than in life. It would be different to drink her blood now, feeling her grief over Stefan. “Are you sure?” he murmured.

Elena nodded, her face white and strained, but determined. “I’m sure,” she said, and pulled him closer.

Damon couldn’t resist any longer. *I’m sorry, little brother.* He slipped his canines beneath Elena’s skin as gently as he could and teased them lightly back and forth, encouraging the flow of her blood into his mouth. Those first swallows were warm and sweet, as heady as wine, filling him with life. He could feel the blood streaming down his throat as he gulped, quenching his thirst and hunger, helping to heal his injuries. The stab wound in his back closed, and the pain disappeared. Elena was sharing her Power with him, and he would be strong again soon.

His mind brushed hers, and he had such a strong feeling of *Elena*, stronger even than came through their bond. He wanted to dive into her, curl up in her essence. There was grief there, and passion—and, abruptly, an overwhelming sense from Elena of *off limits*. Damon pulled back as if he’d been burned. He tried to shut his own mind off, to give her some privacy. It was like pressing your body against another person’s, but both averting your eyes.

Still, images and emotions came through their bond. Frustration. Worry. Fear. And a deep, painful sense of loss. A picture of Stefan’s ivory-handled dagger, clutched in Damon’s bloodstained hand, came to him from Elena, and he winced. The dagger belonged to her as much as it did to Damon.

I had to take it, he told her silently.

I know, came back to him immediately, and with it a wave of sorrow and of love. She was torn apart inside, but she was there. He still had her. Damon drank deeply, letting Elena’s blood, Elena’s sorrow, Elena’s love, fill him once

again.

[#TVD12ElenatotheRescue](#)



“But is Damon okay?” Alaric asked, his fork suspended halfway to his mouth.

“Damon’s always all right,” Meredith said swiftly. That wasn’t quite true, of course—Damon had *died* once—but there was so much going on at the steakhouse Alaric had brought her to that she couldn’t concentrate on their conversation. Alaric had thought it would be nice for them to have a real date night, but Meredith wasn’t sure she was going to be able to cope with the crowd.

The waitress set down their sides—potato, creamed spinach, salad—and Meredith flinched. It was one of her favorite meals, but it smelled terrible, cloying, like sweet-rotting vegetation. The waitress herself, though, smelled delicious, warm and salty and ripe. Meredith averted her eyes and took a tiny sip of ice water. She was always thirsty these days, but if she drank too much water, it made her sick. It wasn’t what her body wanted.

She took a deep breath and concentrated. *I am stronger than this*, she told herself. She hadn’t fed, not even from an animal. If she drank blood, the vampire inside her would get the upper hand, defeat the real Meredith. Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes, and she took another sip of water. The vampire would never be the real her. There had to be a way to fix this.

Behind her, plates clattered and Meredith jumped. She could hear twenty different conversations, all overlapping one another—*why don’t you think it’s a good idea, I’d better call the sitter and let her know, the client isn’t always right, you know what I mean, I don’t think she’s as hot as she thinks she is, we’d been trying and trying, did you see the preview for, not potatoes, rice, well, why did you come, then*—on and on, and it was making it really hard to concentrate. There was a sudden, raucous burst of laughter from the table in the corner, and Meredith flinched again. If this was how vampires experienced the world, she didn’t know how they ever managed to focus.

And the *smells*. Half of them were sickening—the food, someone’s overly floral perfume, the harsh cleanser they’d used on the carpet—but the warm, living smell of the other diners was tantalizing.

It was way too bright in here. Meredith pressed a hand to her temple.

“Are you okay?” Alaric asked, his golden-brown eyes warm with concern. “I thought this would take our minds off everything that’s been going on.”

Determinedly, Meredith yanked her attention away from a disturbing medical conversation three tables away. “I’m great,” she answered, forcing a smile. “You’re right, this is a nice night away from it all.”

She couldn’t tell him. Every time she tried to open her mouth and confide in Alaric, the one person she loved most in the world, it felt like a rough hand was squeezing her lungs, leaving her breathless and silent. He’d stood by her through so much. She was a hunter, with all the danger that entailed. She’d had to kill her own brother, and it had scarred her, made her angry and silent for a while. Law school ate up so much of her time and energy. She was uptight and hard to please. They had survived all that, but this—this was different. She was going to fix this, somehow. He would never have to know.

Alaric smiled. “Try your steak,” he suggested. “Rare enough for you?”

Hesitantly, she picked up her fork and knife and cut into it. She did like her steaks rare, she always had. It was red and juicy inside, almost bloody. She was so hungry. And Alaric was watching her, his forehead furrowing into a frown of concern. Meredith cut off a piece of meat and put it into her mouth.

Bile rose in her throat, and Meredith stifled a gag. It was foul, like she’d bitten into something rotten. Pretending to wipe her lips, Meredith spat the bite into her napkin and smiled half-heartedly at Alaric. Her mouth felt coated in rot, and she tried to discreetly scrape her tongue against her teeth.

She’d seen Damon eat human food at least a hundred times. Not very much, but he’d seemed to enjoy it. Even if she was different now, why couldn’t she eat?

Meredith straightened her shoulders, reminding herself that she was *strong*. She could fight this. If science could cause her to feel this way, then science must be able to fix her.

She had gone back to where Jack had operated on her, but he’d been gone, the operating room just another bland office in a medical center. She hadn’t dared to try the phone number and address on the business card he had given her.

Alaric was saying something, gesturing happily with one hand as he

talked, eating more of his own steak. Meredith blinked at him and tried to smile and nod. She couldn't hear him properly, his voice drowned out by the millions of noises all around them and the welter of scents filling her nose.

Alaric's smell in particular, warm and fresh. She could hear his heart again, pounding steadily in her ears, her own heart speeding to match it. Her canines slowly began to lengthen, and Meredith clamped her mouth shut. She couldn't stop staring at the side of his throat, at the tendon and vein there. She imagined leaping across the table and sinking her fangs into him. She could almost feel how satisfying it would be for Alaric's flesh to rip beneath her teeth.

Meredith swallowed hard and closed her eyes. *I have to fix this*, she thought desperately.

* * *

The ball slid neatly into the pins, knocking them all down in a perfect strike. "Wooo!" Jasmine whooped. "I am the *champion*!" Her long dark curls flew out around her as she spun, arms raised in a victory pose.

"Yes, you're completely awesome," Matt said, rolling his eyes. "I'm still winning, though."

"How can that be possible?" Jasmine said with mock surprise, looking up at the scoreboard over the lane. "Are you cheating?"

Matt laughed. "How could I be cheating?" he asked. "I roll the ball, the ball knocks down the pins, the computer counts how many I knocked down. I've gotten five strikes and you've gotten one. Don't be a sore loser."

Jasmine raised an eyebrow at him. "Everyone you know is *magic*. Bonnie or Elena would spell a scoreboard for you any time."

"I repeat. Sore. Loser," Matt said, smiling at her, admiring the flush of her cheeks and her wide, bright eyes. Her curls flew loose and wild around her shoulders, and Matt just wanted to bury his face in them, breathe in the mint-and-citrus scent of her shampoo.

Instead, he stepped closer and brushed his hand against hers. It occurred to him suddenly that, despite every terrible thing that had happened lately, he was *happy*. He couldn't help feeling guilty. Stefan had been his friend, his comrade-in-arms, and now he was dead.

What kept him from feeling guiltier, though, was that Stefan would have wanted him to be happy. Stefan had approved of Jasmine. "A very nice girl," Stefan had called her once, raising a glass and giving Matt that faint, privately

amused smile he saved for his more human moments.

And wasn't it Matt's turn to find love, finally? He'd spent so long hopelessly infatuated with Elena, and then he'd fallen for poor, doomed Chloe.

After the bleakness of Chloe's death, Jasmine had been like a gift: funny, smart, and beautiful. And she loved Matt back.

A month ago, he'd had to let her know about the true darkness beneath the logical, serene place that had always been her reality. His worst fear had come true: Jasmine had run away from him.

But she had come back. Because she loved him, and because she wanted to help fight that darkness. Now she was able to joke about the supernatural craziness that suffused his life, and he felt closer to her than ever.

The crash of bowling pins in the next lane brought Matt out of his thoughts and he smiled at Jasmine, brushing a long curl away from her face.

"I love you," he told her, his eyes steady on hers.

Jasmine's face brightened with pleasure, and she reached up to catch his hand, her warm fingers entwining with his. "I love you, too," she said. "I'm all in now. No more secrets." She looked determined, her mouth firmly set. She meant it.

Jasmine's ball rattled in the ball return, and Matt slid an arm around her waist as she reached for it. "I'll share one secret now," he said, dropping a kiss on the back of her neck. "The secret of my athletic skill. Let me show you my *moves*, lady." He slid his hand down to hers to help support the ball and moved in closer.

"Oldest line in the book," Jasmine said, leaning back against him, smirking, her serious tone abandoned. Her hair was soft against his cheek. "Go ahead, show me everything."



“Meredith, call me,” Elena said. She clicked off the phone, dropping it onto the passenger seat beside her. It had been a couple of days since she’d been able to reach Meredith. Of course her friend was busy—between law school and patrolling for vampires, she was always busy—but she usually kept in close contact with Elena. They worked *together*, Elena thought, and it was bewildering to have Meredith drop out of touch.

Elena’s palm itched suddenly, and she rubbed it against the steering wheel as she drove.

Without warning, a cool chill, like a trickle of cold water, ran down her back. Elena jerked, automatically pressing down on the gas pedal. There was someone following her, she was certain. Her eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror.

A dark SUV crept up closely behind her. She couldn’t make out the driver’s face.

Elena let her eyes shift, using her Guardian Power to search for nearby auras, and blinked in surprise. The aura of whoever was driving was pure white, spreading out around the SUV in a great cloud of light. Beautiful, really, but not human. Not vampire or werewolf either.

And it was aggravatingly familiar. No wonder the figure-eight-shaped scar on her hand had itched—the cut Mylea had given her was probably some sort of homing device. It would be like the Guardians to mark Elena in a way that made her easy to track.

Elena pulled over onto the shoulder and turned off the engine. Climbing out of the car, she felt her heart beat faster at the sight of the tall woman with smooth blond hair.

Mylea herself stepped out of the SUV, the Celestial Guardian who had initiated Elena into her own Guardianship, and who had bound her and Damon together.

Celestial Guardians were *not* her favorite people, not by a long shot. Self-righteous, judgmental, and dangerous were about the right words for

them. But they were also Powerful. If Mylea had come here about Jack and his vampires, she could give Elena Power that would help her defeat them. Elena would be able to take revenge for Stefan. She could protect Damon.

Elena took a deep breath and walked toward the Guardian, roadside gravel crunching beneath her feet.

“Elena Gilbert,” the tall, golden-haired Guardian said levelly as soon as they were face-to-face. Her eyes, the same dark blue as Elena’s own, were cool and assessing. “The Celestial Court requires your service. It is time for your next Task.”

“We’ve been looking for Jack Daltry,” Elena told her. “He killed Stefan, and countless others, and we don’t know where he’s hiding. Can you help us?”

Mylea’s forehead creased slightly, a small line appearing between her perfectly arched brows. “That is not why I’ve come. Jack Daltry is not your concern,” she said.

“Not my *concern*?” Outrage flooded over Elena, and she clenched her fists involuntarily. Biting back her anger, she tried to speak as calmly as Mylea did. “He killed Stefan. That makes him my concern.”

Mylea’s frown deepened. “It is not your place to avenge the death of vampires,” she said. “Your duty is to protect the human race from the supernatural, not the other way around.”

“I *know*!” Elena’s voice was almost a shout, and she took a deep breath and forced her fists to unclench. Emotion would do nothing to influence Mylea. “But Jack *is* a danger to humans,” she argued, more calmly. “He’s been changing them into vampires. And he feeds on humans, just like any other vampire.”

Celestial Guardians didn’t shrug, in Elena’s experience—it was too human a gesture—but the tilt of Mylea’s head as she listened gave the same impression: What Elena was saying might be true, but it was irrelevant. “Everything in the universe balances eventually, but Jack Daltry and his creations are not your responsibility,” she said. “They are not supernatural.”

“They’re *vampires*,” Elena said, losing her grip on her temper again.

“They are an imitation of true vampires, created by a human,” Mylea said sternly.

Elena gritted her teeth and glared at the Celestial Guardian. “I had

forgotten how fixated Guardians are on technicalities.”

Mylea ignored this. “You have other duties,” she said.

She took Elena’s hand—her own hand was cold, as cold as any vampire’s, Elena realized—and turned it palm upward. Elena’s scar was itching more than ever and shimmering silver against the pale skin of her palm. Mylea ran a finger across it, and Elena shuddered. Her anger was ebbing under Mylea’s touch, she realized, and wondered if Mylea was using her own Power to calm Elena. She yanked her hand out of the Guardian’s grip.

“You swore a blood oath,” Mylea said, her gold-flecked blue eyes fixed on Elena’s, “to obey the Celestial Court’s instructions.”

“I know.” Elena sighed, resigned. There was no use in fighting Mylea. This was what she was made for, to protect people. It didn’t mean she couldn’t concentrate on finding Jack as well. “Tell me what you want.”

“An old vampire has come to this part of the world. She’s been feeding on humans and killing them,” Mylea said. “We’ve known of her for a long time, but she’s only gotten more dangerous the older she gets. She kills for pleasure now, not just for food, and she needs to be stopped. Her name is Siobhan.” She abruptly fell silent, and Elena’s palm immediately stopped itching.

Elena waited a moment, but Mylea seemed to be finished. “That’s it? You can’t tell me anything else?”

Mylea tilted her head again. “What would you like to know?”

“Anything. Where she is? What she looks like?”

Turning to walk back toward her car, Mylea spoke back over her shoulder. “You’ll have the Power to find her and to defeat her when you need to. Have faith in yourself.” When she reached her SUV, she glanced at Elena again. “One thing I will tell you. Siobhan is very clever, and, unlike most of the Old Ones you have hunted, the long years of her life have not driven the more passionate human emotions out of her.”

Elena straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin defiantly. “I’m still going to hunt Jack.”

“It’s not necessary, but we know you will pursue your own way,” Mylea said calmly. “Your attention should, however, be elsewhere. Use caution, Elena. Remember who you are.”

Mylea swung the door of her SUV open. As she stepped into the car, there was a bright flash of white light and Elena closed her eyes against it automatically. When she opened them again a second later, the SUV, and Mylea with it, were gone. The side of the highway was empty. A breeze, chilly with the first signs of autumn, lifted Elena's hair, and she shivered, rubbing absently at her scar.



Damon slipped from shadow to shadow, from alleyway to darkened doorway. The main street of Dalcrest was almost deserted this time of night—occasionally a car’s headlights swept quickly across the fronts of the closed shops and restaurants, and one or two late wanderers hurried down the sidewalks. But he made sure the few people he encountered did not see him.

Stealth was one of his best talents, Damon thought with a small private smile as he lingered in the shadows of a storefront awning, his back pressed against the building’s cold brick. Thanks to Elena’s blood, he’d recovered from the beating he’d taken at Jack’s hands the day before, and he felt strong and fierce.

He ran his tongue across his lips, remembering. Elena’s blood had tasted so sweet. She’d shielded herself against him, but no matter—she was filled with tenderness for Damon, he had felt it through their bond, mixed with her grief and love for Stefan.

Stefan. Damon winced, gritting his teeth. Jack had to pay. He was going to be clever about it this time, though, he told himself sternly. No leaping into action without getting a full picture of the situation. He would have to be patient. Not, unfortunately, one of his best talents.

Damon narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. He was following just a trace of *wrongness*, something he’d sensed that felt slightly off—similar to what he’d sensed from Jack. His nose wrinkled. There was something acidic about the almost-human scent. Like a drop of something sour in a glass of water.

It was one of Jack’s synthetic vampires, he was almost sure, hunting a human. The creature was about two blocks away. He let it cross another street before he pushed off the building to follow, melting into the night. If he could catch the vampire, he could learn more about what Jack was up to and where he was hiding. Maybe he could even figure out how to kill them.

Hurrying down the street, Damon kept his senses pinned on the figures ahead. The synthetic vampire was too loud and yet hesitant. It was a girl, he realized, listening to the weight of her feet pattering along behind the human,

sometimes fast and close as if she was getting ready to pounce, sometimes slowing as if she was almost ready to let her victim go. *Inexperienced*, Damon thought. *Frightened*. Jack must have made this one recently.

He stretched out his Power, listening, trying to sense the minds of the vampire and victim. There it was again, that flash of something almost human, but just slightly off. This one wasn't as good at hiding it yet as Jack was, more evidence that the vampire was freshly made.

The footsteps suddenly stopped, and Damon heard a cut-off shriek. There was a surge of fear—the human—and he quickened his pace. A feeding vampire would be distracted and easier to catch.

The fear in the air drew him toward a deserted parking lot behind a Mexican restaurant. The restaurant was closed for the night, but Damon could still smell the tacos and enchiladas as he rounded the corner of the building. And, overpoweringly, the scent of blood. Damon licked his lips, his canines automatically lengthening. His mouth was watering, and he *wanted*.

But he couldn't drink. He couldn't take an unwilling human, not without hurting Elena. He would never hurt her.

The synthetic vampire and her victim were almost concealed by a wide-spreading tree at the edge of the parking lot. The victim, a young woman, was struggling feebly, whimpering.

Silently, Damon slipped closer to the entangled figures. Balancing on the balls of his feet, he was ready to leap, to take the young false vampire down. Closer... closer still...

He crouched to spring, and then froze. Something familiar about the scent. And the way the vampire moved, smooth as a predator, her long dark hair pulled back at the nape of her neck. Shock ran through him like lightning as his mind caught up with his senses, and he was frozen for a moment.

Then he dashed forward and pulled the vampire off her victim with one hand. "*Meredith?*"

Meredith Sulez—vampire hunter, always composed, always contemptuous of Damon, even when they fought side by side—swung around to face him. He couldn't stop staring, trying to make some sense of what he was seeing. Meredith's thick black eyelashes were wet with tears and bright blood was smeared across her mouth and down her chin.

She gave a quick, broken sob, her eyes dropping as her face colored with shame. "Damon," she said, pleading. "Damon, I didn't mean to. I've

kept myself from feeding for so long, and I just couldn't stop this time. I don't want to kill her. I can't—I can't let her go like this—”

He swallowed and pushed away his shock. Meredith was clinging tightly to her victim, who seemed close to unconscious, her head sagging on Meredith's shoulder. Of course she couldn't influence the girl to make her forget: Jack's vampires had no magic or Power, they were creatures of science.

“Please,” Meredith begged, bringing her desperate gaze up to meet Damon's. She was biting her lip nervously, and a thin trail of her own blood trickled down her chin.

Slipping a cool mask over his surprise—*When did this happen? How could I not have known?*—Damon heaved a theatrical sigh and tugged the human out of Meredith's arms. “Wake up,” he said, and shook her gently. The girl's head bobbed from side to side, her short hair sweeping forward across her cheeks. Meredith had really made a mess of her victim's neck—it was raw and ripped, blood still streaming out. Damon wrinkled his nose fastidiously. “Come on, now.” He shook her again, until she blinked blearily up at him.

Efficiently, Damon bit his own wrist and pressed it against the girl's lips. He forced her to drink a few swallows, enough to make the bites on her throat begin to heal. “That's enough.” Without waiting for an answer, he stroked his Power along her mind, pushing for obedience. “You won't remember what happened. You were out late, and you fell, that's how you hurt your neck. Everything's fine. Go home.”

The girl stared at him blankly and dragged her tongue across her dry lips. “I have to go home,” she muttered. “I was out too late.”

“Good girl,” Damon said, setting her on her feet and straightening her top. It was a pity about the bloodstains, but there was nothing he could do. “Go on.”

The girl nodded and staggered off through the parking lot. Damon watched her go and then turned his attention to Meredith.

She was staring at him, her eyes wide and horrified, her chest heaving with panicky panting breaths. Damon could feel warmth radiating off her, and her heart was pounding hard. If Damon hadn't known better—if he hadn't seen her long, sharp canines and sensed that little bit of *wrongness* under her false aura, he would have thought Meredith was still human.

“So...” he said, enjoying her distress just a little bit, now that his shock

had faded. "What's new with you?"

Meredith gulped unhappily. "I was just so hungry," she said, her voice strained.

Damon shrugged, keeping his expression bland. "You don't need to explain to me, hunter," he said. "How long since Jack changed you?"

Meredith rubbed at her face, trying to wipe away the blood and only smearing it across her cheek. "A week," she said, her eyes downcast. It felt odd, seeing Meredith so humbled. "He was working on me before that, taking me in the middle of the night. I thought I was dreaming. I couldn't see his face."

Damon nodded. "Does anyone else know?" he asked. It wouldn't be the first time that they'd kept him out of the loop, but he couldn't believe Elena had known. He would have sensed her shock through the bond between them, and he'd felt nothing but her constant, aching grief.

Eyes widening in horror, Meredith grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him close to her. "You can't tell them," she said fiercely. "No one else can know. I'm going to find some way to reverse it."

Damon unwrapped Meredith's fingers from his shirt. With a little thrill, he realized that Meredith's predicament could be good. He could use this. "Fine," he told her. "I won't breathe a word. But there's something I want you to do."

Meredith's eyes narrowed. *It was admirable*, Damon thought, *how she could go from a quivering wreck to sharply suspicious, pulling herself together in an instant.* "What do you want, Damon?"

"Don't worry," he assured her with a bitter laugh. "It won't hurt. Probably." She flinched, and he sighed, feeling guilty. "I want you to connect with Jack," he went on, in a softer tone. "He made you for a reason. Surely he must want you to work with him."

Meredith's mouth opened in an automatic denial, and then she stopped. "You want me to spy on him for you," she said thoughtfully.

"If we're going to hunt him, *hunter*, we need eyes on the inside," Damon told her. "So, yes, I want you to spy. Where he's hiding, how many of... you there are, what he's planning. How to kill him. You said once that I might be the best weapon we had, but I think *you* are."

Meredith's face was still streaked with blood and tears, but she wasn't

crying anymore. Her eyes, no longer full of shame, were speculative as she thought through the nuances of Damon's idea. *She'd always been practical, this hunter*, Damon thought, and was surprised by a flare of affection. Meredith wasn't his friend, but he did respect her, which was more than he could say for most humans—or vampires.

The corners of the hunter's mouth went up in a smile—a small one, but a real one. “A secret weapon? That I can do.”

A weapon, Damon thought. He finally had a weapon against Jack. *No, not a weapon*, he corrected himself, as Meredith looked up at him and smiled in grim determination. *An ally*.



Elena knew she was dreaming. She'd had this dream before.

The apartment stretched out before her, shadowed and deserted. "Stefan?" she called uneasily. Her voice sounded small in her own ears.

As she walked down the endless hall in search of Stefan, the lights snapped off behind her, one after the other, leaving pools of darkness. At the end of the hall, the bedroom door was closed. A tendril of worry curled inside her. There was something wrong, something about Stefan, but she couldn't quite remember what it was.

"Stefan?" She already knew what would be behind the door—a dark, empty room, the bedroom curtains billowing in the breeze from the open windows. No Stefan. No one anywhere, just loneliness and silence. Full of dread, she slowly lifted one hand to twist the knob.

This time, though, everything changed.

Instead of her familiar bedroom, the door opened to reveal a room she had never seen before.

Inside, a fire burned in a large stone fireplace, throwing flickering shadows across the log walls. It was warm and cozy, but the woman sitting on the couch looked as cold as ice.

She was wearing a long white dress, and her dark hair hung past her shoulders. Her blue eyes were looking straight at Elena. Elena's heart pounded in terror, and yet, there was something that wouldn't let her leave. But the woman didn't move. Blue eyes gazed straight through Elena and off into the distance.

Of course, Elena realized, she wasn't really there. This was a dream, and the woman couldn't see her.

No longer afraid to stare, she looked the woman over. She was young, maybe in her twenties, and beautiful in an unusual way. Skin so pale Elena could see the blue veins running underneath, and oddly tilted, large, light blue eyes. The woman's hair spilled in an inky cloud over her shoulders. Her

eyebrows arched dramatically dark against that pale skin. Her lips were red.

Snow White, Elena thought, remembering the fairy tale she had read to her little sister Margaret not too long ago. *The Queen said, I wish I had a child with skin as white as this cold snow, and hair as black as this ebony needle, and lips as red as my hot blood.*

As soon as she thought the word “blood,” there was an uncomfortable itch at the back of Elena’s mind.

Elena focused her Power, intent on seeing the woman’s aura. As her Guardian vision slotted into place, she had to grab at the doorframe, holding on so hard that the edges of the door cut into her hand.

The woman’s aura was the bright red of fresh blood, and it spread far, half-filling the room. Elena had never seen an aura so large and vivid, and it reeked of Power and violence. *Vampire*. A real one, not one of Jack’s creations.

Just then, those pale, tilted eyes shifted and met Elena’s. And the woman’s bloodred lips curled into a smile.

* * *

Elena sat up with a jolt, gasping in surprise. She was lying in her own big—*too big, too empty*—bed. Her mattress was soft, her pillows plumped up under her head. Words were completely clear in her mind, as if she had just spoken them. *Get up now*. Without stopping to think, she climbed out of bed and padded across the floor to the window.

The moon was full and sailing high over the apartment buildings on the other side of the street. Beyond them, Elena could see the bloodred path of an aura hanging in the air, leading farther into town.

Siobhan. It must be. Already, she could feel the insistent pull of her Guardian Powers. She had to find Siobhan and kill her, before anyone else died. No time to waste. If she lost the trail of Siobhan’s aura, it might take weeks before she found it again. Weeks when the vampire could be murdering innocent people. Hurrying, Elena slipped her feet into sandals and ran out the door of her apartment.

She had pounded down the stairs and out the front door of her building before she realized she was still dressed in her long lacy white nightgown. It didn’t matter, she decided. She would just scope out Siobhan’s situation, find the room from her dream—a cabin, it looked like—and drive away. She would come back later, with Damon.

At the thought of Damon, something inside Elena twisted. When he had held her in his arms and slipped his fangs into her throat, it had felt so *right*, like a homecoming. She couldn't betray Stefan, not now. But she had always cared for Damon. Stefan had known that.

Driving her little Mini Cooper through the mostly empty roads of Dalcrest, Elena kept glancing up, following the smoky red tendrils of Siobhan's aura. She expected them to lead straight through town and off into the hills nearby, places you might find a cozy cabin like the one Elena had dreamed of. But instead the trail led to the drive-in movie theater at the edge of town.

Elena had never been there, but she had heard about it—it had just opened earlier that summer, playing old movies to lure in families and the student crowd. The marquee outside read:

DOUBLE MIDNIGHT FEATURE

DRACULA

SON OF DRACULA

Ironic, Elena thought. It seemed like Siobhan had a sense of humor.

An old black-and-white film flickered on a huge screen, just visible over the top of the fence. Elena pulled up to the gate, and a white-haired man came out of his little booth to take her money. "First movie's almost over," he said genially. "Half price, sweetheart."

Elena thanked him and pulled the car into the lot below the big screen. There were only about twenty cars there. As she parked, she saw Siobhan's aura trace across the lot to a big old boat of a black car parked near the back.

Siobhan was leaning against the car.

In a moment, everything in Elena went on alert. She slammed open the door of her car, fumbling off her seat-belt, her gaze fixed on Siobhan. The vampire was tall and elegant lounging there, her long black hair cascading down her shoulders just as in Elena's dream. As Elena watched, she wiped her mouth daintily with the back of one pale hand and raised her other hand in greeting, fanning her fingers at Elena in a *ta-ta* gesture.

Elena's feet hit the asphalt, and the doors of her Power flew open. She felt something burst from her, a huge silent wave of Power crashing toward Siobhan, ready to drag the vampire under.

But it was too late. By the time Elena reached the car, the vampire was gone, moving so fast that Elena saw only a blur. Power from Elena hit the side

of the black car, and its back panel crumpled, denting in with the sharp sound of bending metal.

Elena dashed toward the blur, her long white nightgown blowing against her legs. Maybe there was still time. The lot was full, but no one else had seen, their eyes fixed on the movie.

Above her on the screen, Mina Harker was saying, “I felt its breath on my face and then my lips....” and then gasped. There was no sign of Siobhan anywhere. The trail of her aura had vanished.

Elena turned back to the car. Two figures were silhouetted in the front seat, leaning together. As Elena got closer, she could see long dark hair, the girl’s face pressed close against the neck of the guy. It almost looked like another feeding vampire, but they were too still. Maybe they were just unconscious, but dread pooled in Elena’s stomach.

She reached for the passenger door of the car and yanked it open.

When the door opened, the couple slumped sideways like rag dolls, any illusion of life disappearing. The girl’s arm flopped limply over the seat onto the floor of the car. Her neck was destroyed. The guy’s cheek rested upon hers and he gazed vacantly past Elena, his eyes empty. Tentatively, Elena reached out and touched the guy’s neck, then felt the girl’s wrist for a pulse. They were both dead, but their skin was still warm, their blood still wet.

Elena’s heart pounded, blood rushing dizzyingly in her ears. She had been just a few moments too late.

On the flickering black-and-white screen above Elena’s head, Mina, her voice full of horror, was telling the vampire hunter Van Helsing, “She looked like a hungry animal... a wolf. And then she turned and ran back into the dark.”

* * *

Elena turned the steering wheel and noticed, with a shiver of disgust, that there was a smudge of blood on the back of her hand. Pulling a tissue out of her glove compartment, she wiped it away.

In the end, she’d left Siobhan’s victims where she found them. Everyone in the audience had their eyes fixed on the screen above them; no one had seen her. It hurt to abandon them like that—their broken bodies gazing glassily at her, as if silently asking for some kind of acknowledgment—but getting tied into a police case would cause complications.

Once, finding two dead bodies would have horrified and traumatized

Elena. The girl she used to be would have called the police, would have wept. She'd seen so much since then. Now all she could muster up was pity and a hard determination to *catch* Siobhan, to stop her. Elena didn't know when she had become this colder, tougher person.

Before she could really think about it, about how she had changed, she caught a flicker of a peacock blue and rust-red aura in the woods to the side of the highway. *Damon*. Their bond tugged insistently in her chest, and she pulled over.

She could feel him coming toward her, and a moment later, the passenger side door opened and Damon climbed into the car. He was smiling, and Elena felt a sharp pull of excitement, not her own. Damon was up to something. She found herself smiling back at him, her heart lifting.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I could ask you the same question. You're a little underdressed." Damon said, his gaze skating curiously across her lacy nightgown. Then he stiffened. "Are you bleeding?"

"What?" Elena said, and realized. "No, not me. I got a Guardian task and I wasn't... I didn't find the vampire, but I found some victims."

"Jack's your task?" Through the bond, she could feel his pleasure that the Guardians might finally be on their side.

Elena sighed. "No," she said. "A different vampire, a real one."

"Don't let this distract you," Damon said quickly. His voice was flat, but there was urgency underneath it, and pain. "Jack's the most important thing. For Stefan."

"Damon..." she said, reaching for his hand.

There was a cracking noise like a gunshot, and the roof of the car suddenly dented in. Elena screamed as a figure leaped from the roof of the car, kicking in the window. Damon was outside in a flash, blue pieces of safety glass scattering everywhere.

Elena barely had time to draw a shocked breath when Damon ripped the back door of the car open and shoved in a struggling figure dressed in black. *A vampire*, she realized. One thin-fingered hand flailed out and caught Elena's hair, dragging her head back against the seat. She shrieked as sharp pain shot through her scalp, and then again as Damon jerked the vampire's arm back, long strands of Elena's hair still dangling from its fingers.

“Don’t touch her!” Damon hissed, throwing himself on top of the other vampire and clamping one heavy hand on the back of its neck. Elena could feel Damon’s vicious satisfaction in the violence, his pleasure in being able to act, to win against an enemy again.

“What are you doing?” Elena asked, pressing a hand against her aching scalp as she twisted around in the driver’s seat to get a better look. The vampire was young, looked younger than she was. He writhed and growled as Damon shoved his face down against the seat and hit him hard between the shoulder blades. Finally, he grew still, trapped beneath Damon and panting hard. His dark eyes were fixed on Elena, his face distorted with hatred and fury. He bared his teeth at her, his canines long and sharp. If he managed to get loose...

It must be one of Jack’s synthetic vampires, she realized, because his aura seemed just like a human’s.

“I can tell now,” Damon said breathlessly, picking up on her curiosity. “There’s a touch of something *wrong* about them. I don’t know what exactly. It’s like a chemical taint.” The vampire bucked under him and Damon hit him on the back of the head, forcing out a grunt of pain. “He was lurking outside our building. He thought he could get to us.”

Elena’s stomach lurched.

Picking up on her fear, Damon wrapped a hand around the younger vampire’s throat, squeezing. *See how much stronger I am than he is*, his face seemed to say. *I’ll protect us*.

“Don’t kill him in my car, Damon,” Elena objected, her eyes drawn back to the young vampire’s furious face.

“I can’t kill him, I don’t know how,” Damon said, but he was grinning. The vampire growled, the sound muffled against the backseat, and Damon smacked him lightly on the back of the head, his other hand still tight around his throat. “I’m going to do some research. Where can we keep him?”

“Not the apartment, that won’t hold him,” Elena said quickly. “Let me think.”

“Somewhere no one will overhear,” Damon said. “Somewhere we can keep him under control.”

Elena started the engine and pulled out on the highway, heading for campus. “My old dorm. It’ll be empty for a few more weeks, and there are storage rooms, like cages, in the basement.” Damon looked doubtful, and she

added quickly, “They’re strong. And no one will hear him down there.”

“Excellent,” Damon said, and Elena felt another flare of excitement from him. “There’s something I want to try.”



Meredith dug her nails into the palms of her hands and tried not to breathe. The vampire—the *young* vampire, he looked like a high school kid—was watching her, leaning against the bars of his cage. Beneath his shaggy black bangs, his dark eyes shone with hate as he looked at the group staring at him. Both of his wrists were chained to the steel bars of one of the dorm’s basement storage cages, and he twisted his wrists against them unceasingly, testing the handcuffs for weakness. Damon must have found a way to weaken him, so the chains were enough to hold him.

Damon tapped the bars between them, poking at the vampire’s face, and the kid lunged, snapping at him with sharp teeth. Damon pulled his hand back with a laugh. “You see, he’s fast, but no faster than I am,” he explained. Meredith, Alaric, Bonnie, Matt, Jasmine, and Elena had all gathered to see Damon’s latest development. “I wanted to show him to you all, because I want your help in figuring out how Jack made him, and how to kill him.”

The trapped vampire was growling, softly but steadily, like a savage animal. The sound grated on Meredith’s nerves, and when Alaric’s hand brushed against her arm, she jerked away.

“Are you okay?” he asked her quietly, and she nodded, not looking at him.

“I’m fine.” She had to keep her distance from Alaric. She felt sick, thinking about it, but she could still smell the tantalizing, salty scent of his blood.

“It’s so creepy, the way he’s just staring at us,” Bonnie said. Her small face was wrinkled with disgust, and she clung to Zander’s arm. With a jolt, Meredith realized she was the only one who could hear the vampire’s growling.

Meredith felt dizzy. She was just like this kid huddled against the bars. What would Elena say if she knew what Meredith was now? Or Bonnie? Would they want to chain her up the same way?

Damon knew about her, but Damon was practical: He thought Meredith

was his best route to finding Jack. Not to mention that he'd given his word, and Meredith knew that once he gave it, Damon never broke his word. Besides, she'd find a cure before anyone else found out the truth, she promised herself, stuffing her hands into her pockets so no one could see them shake.

Behind her, Jasmine pressed her back against the wall, as far from the imprisoned vampire as she could get. She was holding tightly to Matt's hand, and Meredith could hear her quick, panicked little breaths. This was Jasmine's first face-to-face encounter with an unfriendly vampire, Meredith realized. Matt was stroking her hair with his other hand, comforting, his attention on Jasmine. The vampire thrashed and kicked, straining against his bonds, the handcuffs clanging against the bars of his cage, and Jasmine yelped, burying her face in Matt's shoulder.

"Let me try something," Damon said, and picked up a stake from the floor. The vampire in the cage stopped twisting at his handcuffs and stood very still, his eyes narrowed.

"We know that won't kill him," Elena said, her voice even. She and Damon glanced at each other, clearly in perfect accord. *They were strangely alike*, Meredith thought.

"It'll hurt, though," Damon said cheerfully. Turning, he slammed the stake between the bars and into the vampire's chest. The kid gasped, a long rattling breath, and his eyes flew wide open. Damon pulled the stake out. A bright bubble of blood swelled out of the wound and trickled down the vampire's chest, but Meredith could already see the hole closing up, leaving the vampire's chest unmarked.

"You see how quickly he heals," Damon told them.

Meredith flinched. The kid probably hadn't asked for this to happen to him, either. That was true of most vampires, she supposed. They'd all been victims once. It wasn't something she'd worried about, until now.

She pulled her hand from her pocket and rubbed at her forehead. It was too much—the noise and the smells of her friends' blood, all of them crowded together down here—and she was so hungry. She hadn't had any blood since that shameful night Damon had found her.

"Want to tell us where Jack's hiding?" Damon said, his voice friendly. Meredith glanced between Damon and Elena. Elena was nibbling on her lip, her eyes bright. This was about Stefan, of course. It wasn't just a vampire hunt. If they couldn't take vengeance on Jack directly, torturing one of his

creations would help.

The vampire bared his teeth at Damon. "I don't need to tell you," he said. He sounded sulky, like the human teenager he had been probably only a month or two before. "Jack'll find *you*, and then you'll be sorry. I hope he lets me help kill you."

"Wrong answer." Damon shoved the stake through his chest again, and the kid screamed, a high shrill sound. Meredith shuddered.

When Damon pulled the stake out with a sickening squelch, the kid hung against the bars for a moment, panting, before the sullen expression settled back on his face. "He'll get me out," he muttered, and his eyes fixed on Meredith's. Frozen to the spot, she met his gaze. Did *he* know what she was?

Damon grinned, an angry, deadly grin, and gripped the stake again.

Alaric coughed. "Instructive as this is," he said dryly, "weren't we going to discuss our plans?"

"Right." Damon loosened his grip on the stake and turned away from the young vampire.

In that second, the vampire lunged at him with teeth and clawed fingers, reaching through the bars between them, moving so fast Meredith's eyes could barely follow. Without thinking, she charged forward, shoving the kid away, her hands slamming against the bars of his cage.

"Thank you." Damon stepped back, rubbing at his neck. He glanced at the trapped vampire, his eyes sharp. "We'll talk about this later," he said, his tone threatening. The kid hadn't been able to reach far, bound as he was, but there were bloody scrapes across the side of Damon's throat.

Relief loosened Meredith's chest, and she took a deep breath. When it had come down to it, she was still on the right side. All this hunger she was feeling, the way all her friends, except Damon, smelled like *food*, was just a technicality. She was going to be fine.

"Damon found this vampire outside our building," Elena told them all. "We have to assume it means that Jack knows that Damon's living there and will send more vampires after him. He's on Jack's list, and we all know how far Jack will go to... eliminate his enemies." She sounded businesslike, but Meredith could hear the undercurrent of fear in her voice. Elena couldn't handle losing anyone else.

“So we need to step up our game,” Bonnie said cheerfully. “I’ll pull out all the tracking spells I can think of and make some more protection charms for all of us. Zander and the Pack can—”

“Uh.” Zander broke in, looking uncomfortable. “We’ve got a lot of official Pack business going on right now. I mean, I’ll do whatever I can, but I don’t think you can count on the whole Pack.”

“But...” Bonnie looked confused.

Zander shifted from one foot to the other, his white-blond hair falling into his eyes. “We’ll patrol like we usually do, I just don’t know how much else the guys are up for.” He wasn’t looking at Bonnie, or at any of them.

Meredith frowned. Zander was acting peculiar. Then she caught a full whiff of Zander’s scent as he moved and couldn’t think of anything else. His blood would be strong and wild, she knew, and she couldn’t help imagining how an alpha werewolf might taste. Her teeth ached, and she stepped back away from him. Clearly, she wasn’t fine yet. She *had* to fix this.

Damon’s eyes met hers for a moment, and she was surprised by the sympathy in his gaze.

“Okay,” Elena said briskly. “Bonnie, that sounds great, and Zander, just have the Pack do what they can.” Zander nodded. Bonnie was still staring at him, her lips slightly parted.

“You and I will work on this fellow,” Damon said to Elena, with a vicious glance at the trapped vampire, who snarled back at him. “If we can’t get information on Jack out of him, maybe we’ll be able to figure out how to kill him.”

“If I can get some of his blood, I can analyze it at the hospital to see how Jack is making his vampires,” Jasmine offered shyly. “Maybe Matt can help me.”

“And I’d like to try to track down Jack’s history,” Alaric added. “The more we learn about who he was before he became a vampire, the better we’ll be able to fight him.”

From behind Alaric, Damon caught Meredith’s eye and cocked an eyebrow at her. They’d already discussed Meredith’s next step.

“I want to head down to Atlanta for a while, talk to Darlene and the other hunters who were working with Jack,” she said, slipping easily into the lie they’d decided on. “They’ve got to know something they haven’t told us,

something that will help us track him.”

Alaric took a half step toward her, his mouth opening in a question. Of course he was surprised—she hadn’t discussed this with him at all.

“It’s important,” she said, begging him with her eyes to understand. Alaric bit his lip, and then his face softened. He knew how she had admired Jack, back when she thought he was a hunter, and Meredith could see him deciding that this would be good for her.

“Okay,” he said. “Don’t be gone long, though. We should all be sticking together right now.”

Elena frowned. “You’re probably the best one to figure out how to kill this vampire.”

Damon put a hand on Elena’s shoulder, and she leaned toward him. “I can handle the fake vampire,” he said smoothly. “Meredith should do what she has to do.”

It would be good to get away, Meredith thought. She *had* to get away before she hurt the people she loved.

She couldn’t live like this. Jack must know something. There had to be a way to undo what he had done to her. All she had to do was make him trust her.

* * *

Meredith left the next day, amid a flurry of a send-off. She kissed Alaric, hugged Elena and Bonnie and the others. Damon hung back, watching her with sharp, half-amused eyes. Meredith promised to touch base often, told them she’d let them know when she got to Atlanta. The whole time she concentrated on not breathing, to avoid catching anyone’s scent, and managed to keep herself from sinking her teeth into anyone’s throat.

Once she had driven a few miles away from home, Meredith pulled onto the shoulder to take a breath and let herself think.

“We can find out more by infiltrating Jack’s group than by capturing him,” Damon had said. “That’s where you come in.”

Licking her lips nervously, she reached into her bag and pulled out the business card she had found in her pocket that first terrible day, now creased and fuzzy at the edges. *I can do this*, she told herself. *I am a hunter. It doesn’t matter if I’m afraid, I’ll still keep fighting.* Then she pulled out her phone and dialed the number written on the card.

“It’s Meredith,” she said when Jack picked up. “You were right. Please. I have to see you.”

* * *

Jack’s hideout wasn’t far away. Following the directions he’d given her over the phone, Meredith found a road that ended outside a long-abandoned warehouse at the edge of town. She got out of the car, slamming the door behind her, and crunched her way across the gravel parking lot.

The warehouse was dilapidated, and there were no cars in the lot except hers. A fast-food wrapper blew across the ground in front of her. Everything was eerily silent.

It didn’t matter. She knew Jack was here.

The warehouse’s big metal door rattled when Meredith knocked on it. She could hear footsteps coming. When it opened, there stood Jack, his face carefully neutral.

“Meredith,” he said, a little warily.

“I still hate you,” Meredith said quickly. “You killed Stefan, and I can’t forgive that. But—” She paused, her heart pounding, uncomfortably aware that what she was about to say was only partially a lie. “I don’t belong anywhere else. I can’t—all I want to do is *bite* people. I need to be in a place where my friends are safe from me. I need to be away from them.”

There was a long pause while Jack looked her up and down, his mouth pursed. Meredith shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. Could he tell that she had come to spy on him, that she and Damon were working together?

“*Please*,” she dropped her voice as if she was telling him a shameful secret. “You were right. It feels *good*. I didn’t—don’t—want to be a vampire, but physically, I feel alive for the first time in my life. I want you to show me what I’m capable of.”

Jack stared at her, his face unreadable. Meredith kept her eyes steady on his, trying to project sincerity and pleading. She needed him to believe her, or she’d lose all chance of finding a cure.

Jack frowned, and for a moment she thought he’d slam the heavy metal door in her face. But then his lips turned up in the warm smile she had loved, back when she thought he was her friend. “Come on in,” he said. “We’ve all been waiting.”

[#TVD12MerediththeSpy](#)



The trapped vampire let out a high, wordless shriek and tried to scrabble away from Damon, his chains clanging against the bars of his cage. Streams of gasoline ran down his legs, leaving long, wet patches on his clothes. Elena gritted her teeth and kept herself from looking away. This was important. This was to avenge Stefan, to save Damon. Besides, she thought wearily, he would be healed again in a matter of seconds.

“Stop fighting,” Damon said, his voice flat. The young vampire kicked at him, but Damon grabbed hold of his leg through the bars and pinned it for a moment as the vampire tried to twist away. “Hand me the lighter, Elena.”

Holding her breath to keep from inhaling the fumes, Elena reluctantly pulled the lighter from her pocket and handed it over, then backed a few steps away, watching them nervously. Damon flicked it and reached through the bars to touch the flame to the edge of the vampire’s pant leg.

The cloth burst into flame immediately and burned fast, green and blue flames flickering off the vampire’s body, his skin blackening. He screamed again and kicked free of Damon’s restraining hand. Losing his catlike grace for a moment, Damon stumbled back into Elena, knocking her forcefully into the wall.

“Elena!” he cried.

“I’m okay, I think,” she said, rotating her shoulder experimentally. It hurt where she’d hit the wall and her mouth had a coppery taste of blood, but she would be fine.

Damon picked up a fire extinguisher from the floor beside him and sprayed it across the young vampire, quenching the flames. “Cooperate,” he said again, his voice low and threatening.

“What’re you going to do if I don’t, set me on *fire*? That’s not working out too well for you so far,” the vampire said, breathing hard. His face was smudged with smoke and his pants were in tatters, but the skin beneath the clothes, which had been blackened a moment before, was already pink and healthy again. “When I get loose, I’m going to kill you.”

Damon laughed, sounding genuinely amused. "Okay, kid, you do that."

Scrambling to her feet, Elena grimaced. Their prisoner was glaring at her defiantly, dark eyes in a pale pointed face.

"So fire doesn't work either," Damon said thoughtfully to her, tapping his fingers against the bars of the cage. "We're running out of ideas on how to kill him. I fed him rat poison yesterday, but it didn't do a thing."

Elena felt a twinge of discomfort, and she knew Damon sensed it by the way he tensed in response. "I'm not sure we should keep torturing him this way, Damon," Elena said reluctantly. Damon was enjoying this too much. He'd been careless and ruthless, sometimes, but he'd never really struck her as vicious, not before Stefan died.

A warm feeling of affection came through their bond. Damon loved that she wasn't as ruthless as he was, Elena knew. He loved the human side of her. All he said, though, was, "He'd killed three teenagers that I know of before I caught him, if that's any comfort to you. Friends of his. I buried them to stop from causing a panic."

The vampire boy, already recovered from the flames, shot Elena a narrow smile and rattled his handcuffs against the bars of his cage. The sound echoed throughout the cavernous empty basement. "They were delicious," he said, eyes tracing over the vein on her throat. "I'd do it again if I had the chance."

Elena leaned back against the bars of the storage unit on the other side of the aisle, as far as she could get from the vampire boy's malicious gaze. "Did you try to influence him?" she asked Damon.

"No use," Damon replied. "Watch."

He leaned in close to the bars and looked into the boy's eyes, his gaze intent. Elena felt the stirring of his Power as he pulled upon it. "Bite your own wrist," he said to the boy soothingly. "Tear it open. It won't hurt."

For a moment, Elena thought it might work. The young vampire turned his wrists thoughtfully, pulling against the handcuffs. Then the boy's lips curled into a sneer, and he spat directly in Damon's face.

"Ugh," Damon said, pulling back and wiping at his face. "Nasty little thug. We'll go on seeing how long it takes him to starve then, shall we?" This was said with a sharp glare at the boy.

"What will that prove? It's not like we can starve Jack," Elena said

uneasily. Again, she felt that flash of affection from Damon. He liked when she disagreed with him, liked their verbal sparring. She glanced up to see him watching her, his dark eyes intent. He was sensing her anxiety and trying to make her feel better, she knew, and something in her relaxed. He couldn't be going off the deep end, not if he still wanted to make her happy.

Elena didn't quite know what to do with the warmth of the feelings passing between them. *Stefan*, she thought, and bent her head, hiding her face behind her long fall of hair.

Damon cocked his head, listening to sounds too faint for Elena to hear. "Finally. They're here."

* * *

It smelled stale and musty in the basement, and Matt's sneakers and Jasmine's boots kicked up little clouds of gray dust as they walked. Jasmine had a black bag full of medical supplies dangling from one hand, and she looked tense and expectant, her lips tight.

"You don't have to do this," Matt said suddenly. He couldn't lie and say that having a doctor on their side wasn't a big help, but they could figure something else out if they had to. He didn't want to involve Jasmine in this—at least, any more than she was already.

Jasmine shook her head, frowning at him. "I told you, I'm all in." Her lips twitched in a small smile. "Besides, how many doctors get the opportunity to study this kind of physical transformation?"

They rounded the corner into another row of barred storage rooms. Smoke hung in the air, and there were scorch marks on the concrete floor. Damon and Elena were outside the only occupied one, Elena leaning back as far from the locked cage as she could get. Above their heads, a fluorescent light flickered dizzily.

"Thank God you're here," Elena said. "We really need a new tactic. Just attacking him isn't doing anything."

As they drew level with the cage, Matt took another look at the vampire Damon had caught. He seemed like some little high school punk, the kind who, when Matt had been in school, would have had a skateboard and worn a lot of black clothing. "He doesn't look like he'd be hard to handle."

Damon stiffened. "He's stronger than he looks," he said defensively, and Matt managed to stop himself from rolling his eyes. Damon was so *touchy* sometimes.

A slow, metallic tapping noise drew his attention back to the young vampire. The kid was staring at Jasmine, clinking his handcuffs steadily against the bars of his cage. As Matt watched, he inhaled deeply and his mouth opened a little, showing his canines, extended and slick with spit. His tongue licked over them briefly, pink against the white of his teeth, and his lips tilted into an unfriendly smile. Instinctively, Matt pulled Jasmine closer.

That reaction came from the part of him that would have kept his caveman ancestors crouching by the fire, he thought, the quick instinctive knowledge that there was something terrible out there in the dark.

“Hold on,” Damon told them. Almost faster than Matt’s eyes could follow, he whipped open the door of the cage and dashed inside. The young vampire snarled at him, and there was a brief vicious scuffle. It ended when Damon grabbed his opponent’s head with both hands and twisted sharply. There was a loud cracking sound and the kid slumped and slid down the bars, dangling from one chained hand. Jasmine gasped.

“That should keep him down for a little while,” Damon told her. “Better hurry.”

“He’s not dead?” Jasmine asked, stunned.

“That wouldn’t even kill *me*, doctor,” Damon said, amused. “And he’s a lot harder to kill.”

Hesitantly, Jasmine came into the cage and knelt down by the young vampire’s side. She felt for a pulse and frowned. “His heart’s beating,” she said, and Damon nodded, backing out of the cage to give her room.

“It’ll do that,” Damon said.

Gaining confidence, Jasmine pulled a syringe from her bag and briskly felt for a vein in the vampire’s arm. She drew one vial of blood and started a second. Matt loved watching Jasmine work. Anything nervous or shy about her slipped away immediately. Her hands were deft and quick, her manner calm. It made him feel weirdly proud, that a girl this capable, this self-assured, wanted *him*.

Jasmine gently moved the kid’s arm a bit to help the blood flow. Matt frowned, and took a step forward. Something wasn’t right—

With a sudden burst of movement, the vampire’s eyes shot open as he flung his arm around Jasmine’s neck and yanked her down onto the floor with him. Jasmine screamed shrilly. The vampire wrapped his hand in her curly hair and yanked back her head. Throwing his body half over her, he sank his

fangs into her throat, giving a soft sound of pleasure.

“No!” Matt shouted, and charged toward them, his fists clenched.

Damon, moving so fast he seemed like a blur, got there first, yanking the kid away from Jasmine with a snarl of fury. He slammed the young vampire to the ground and snapped his neck again. A trickle of blood ran from the kid’s mouth and dripped startlingly red against the dull gray of the concrete floor.

Lifting Jasmine into his arms, Damon dashed out of the cage and slammed the door behind them. She was limp, her head back against Damon’s shoulder, eyes closed. Her usually honey-tan skin was gray and drained.

“She’s all right,” Damon told them, lowering Jasmine to the floor. Matt reached out and helped, taking Jasmine’s weight in his arms. She was sobbing, he realized, her cheeks wet with tears.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. He knelt down and lowered her head into his lap, her long hair spilling across his thighs. Then he turned to Damon. “*All right?*” he said furiously. “How could you leave her in there with him?”

“His recovery time is getting faster,” Damon said, almost to himself. “I didn’t know.”

I brought her into this, Matt thought, and cupped her cheek gently, feeling sick with guilt. “I shouldn’t have let her go in there,” he said, his voice choked.

Jasmine wiped away the tears, her hands shaking. “I’m okay,” she said, her voice rough, and tried to sit up.

“Stop!” Matt said, pulling her closer, trying to hold her tight. “You’re bleeding.”

“There are bandages in my bag,” Jasmine said, laying her head back in his lap. Her voice shook, and Matt could see her gritting her teeth, forcing herself to be calm. “Put pressure on it.”

Elena was already in motion, deftly pressing a cotton pad against Jasmine’s neck and wrapping gauze around it. “The bleeding’s almost stopped,” she said. “It’s not as bad as it looked.”

Now that he knew Jasmine would be okay, Matt felt like he was going to throw up. Everyone he had ever fallen in love with had *died*, even Elena, and he had just gone ahead and let Jasmine into his mess of a life.

“We’re going,” he said to her soothingly. “I’ll get you home.” He tried

to pick her up again, but Jasmine twisted out of his arms.

“Wait,” she said, determined. “I want... I could use the blood of a natural vampire, for comparison.”

“Jasmine, you don’t have to...” Matt began, his heart aching.

She gave Damon a shaky smile. “Put out your arm for me? Please?”

Damon extended one arm, and Jasmine used a fresh hypodermic to draw a vial of blood. She worked efficiently, but, as she capped the vial, her hands shook and she dropped it, spilling more blood across the concrete floor. “Sorry, sorry,” she said, her hands fumbling in her bag, a flush stealing across her pale cheeks.

“My fault,” Damon murmured, holding out his arm and smiling reassuringly. “I’m so clumsy sometimes.”

Matt blinked. Damon Salvatore, gentle and kind with Matt’s girlfriend? Bothering to put someone other than Elena at ease?

Matt ran a hand down Jasmine’s back, reassuring himself that she was solid and real and not hurt. He was heavily aware of the unconscious vampire, his face turned toward them, soon to awake again.

“You’re not safe,” he murmured, almost to himself, and felt Damon’s eyes on him. “None of us are safe, not while Jack and his vampires are after us.”

Part of Matt wanted to rush Jasmine away. If none of them were safe here, wasn’t the solution to get away? Jack didn’t want Jasmine, didn’t want Matt. He was after Damon.

But Matt knew that Elena, whose dark blue eyes were fixed intently on Damon’s face, would never agree to leave him. And he could tell just by looking at Jasmine, capable and strong once more, that she wouldn’t either.

“Not until we figure out a way to kill them,” Damon agreed. He nodded to Jasmine. “That’s where you come in.”

Something in Matt hardened. The only thing that mattered was protecting Jasmine.

“You have to keep experimenting on him,” he told Damon, looking at the young face of the vampire in the cage, slack in unconsciousness. “If we want this to end, we’ll have to finish them.”



“More coffee, hon?” The waitress refilled Bonnie and Elena’s cups before moving on to the next table. The little diner halfway between their apartments was busy, bright, and cheerful, as it always was on a Sunday morning. They hadn’t been here in a while, but Bonnie thought bright and cheerful was exactly what Elena needed right now.

“Sounds like Jasmine’s tougher than I thought,” Bonnie said, swiping cream cheese across her bagel. Elena had been filling her in on the latest in the quest to discover the truth about the synthetic vampires. “Has Meredith found out anything from the hunters down in Atlanta?”

Elena sighed, resting her chin on her fist as she stared into her coffee. “She hasn’t returned any of my calls. I got a text saying she was okay, but that’s it.”

“Yeah, same. She’s probably busy,” Bonnie offered. Meredith was pretty good at looking after herself. Right now, Bonnie was more concerned about Elena.

Elena had been distant lately, caught up with Damon and with her new Guardian task. Bonnie was glad that she had something to focus on. Elena was still pale and solemn, but she didn’t seem as stunned with grief as she’d been right after Stefan’s death.

Bonnie ripped open a sugar packet and poured it into her coffee. Mostly to get the sad, distracted expression off Elena’s face, she asked, “How’s the search for Siobhan? Any luck?”

Elena scowled. “I haven’t had any leads on her since I lost her aura at that drive-in. I keep dreaming about her, but I can’t *find* her.”

Munching her bagel, Bonnie listened to Elena describe the dreams—a dark-haired woman in a cabin, a bloodred aura, nothing much happening, but a sense of dread overhanging everything—and tried to offer helpful suggestions. “Maybe she’s up in the hills? There’s a lot of hunting cabins up there.”

Elena leaned back in the booth, her shoulders slumping. “I thought of

that. I tried walking through the hills, but I didn't feel anything. My Guardian Powers are supposed to lead me to her, I guess I have to trust that they will when the time is right."

The waitress slapped the check on their table as she walked by. Bonnie was reaching for it when Elena sat up straighter and frowned at her. "Anyway," she said briskly, "we've talked about my problems, but what's going on with you? You seem stressed."

"I do?" Bonnie asked reluctantly. She'd been trying to act normal, to make Elena feel better. Elena nodded, and Bonnie rested her temple in her hand. "I guess... Zander's been strange lately. He's always on the phone with the rest of the Pack, but he never tells me what they're talking about. It's like he's got secrets with them that he doesn't want me knowing. He's never been like that before. And then with how weird he was about the Pack not helping defend us all against Jack." She glanced up at Elena, who nodded in confirmation. "I can't help wondering—"

As she talked, she thought about how Zander had stayed out late the night before, long past when she had gone to bed, with no explanation, and she could hear her own voice getting higher and softer, like a little girl's, "—wondering if Zander maybe doesn't like me so much anymore."

Elena laughed. "Listen, Bonnie, if there's one thing I know, it's that Zander's crazy about you. Seriously. You two are perfect together." Her smile faded, and Bonnie knew she was thinking about Stefan.

"Maybe," Bonnie said doubtfully, poking her finger through the puddle of coffee left in her saucer. She couldn't really put what she was worrying about into words, and certainly she couldn't explain to Elena, who had not just Stefan but even Damon eternally, endlessly, death-will-not-part-us in love with her. But people did fall out of love, all the time. There was something in Zander's eyes when he looked at her—something sad, and faraway. It wasn't the way he used to look at her. "I'll see him later today, at least. We're going to have lunch and catch a movie."

"See?" Elena told her. "Talk to him, and you'll work it out."

"Maybe," Bonnie said again. They paid the check and walked out into the bright glare of the sunny parking lot.

Elena hugged Bonnie hard before she got into her car. "It'll be okay," she said reassuringly.

Bonnie smiled and raised a hand in farewell as Elena pulled away. Just

as she turned to head to her own car, her phone buzzed in her pocket. It was a text from Zander.

Sorry, can't make it for lunch. Catch up with you later.

XO

Glaring down at the phone, Bonnie felt her cheeks getting hot. Six years together, and he wouldn't even tell her why he couldn't meet her? He just blew her off?

It was so *frustrating*. The sunlight dimmed, and she wondered if she was the one doing it. She could feel her Power gathering within her, ready for her to call on nature, work her will. She could ball this Power up and fire it off at Zander, find out once and for all what was going on with him.

Better yet, she could force her Power inside him, make Zander do what she wanted, *make* him be the sweet, easygoing, loving guy she was used to. She felt energy rising, swirling dark and expectant inside her.

Her heart was pounding like crazy. Bonnie stopped and pressed her hand against her chest, breathing deeply, until the dark energy started to dissipate. What was she thinking? She couldn't use her Power on Zander. It would be using him, abusing him, and if she did that, then she was the one who would kill the love between them.

Stuffing her phone back into her pocket, Bonnie marched over toward her car. She just had to have faith. Whatever was going on, Zander would tell her in his own time.

* * *

Meredith crawled through a dark tunnel, the stone cold beneath her hands and knees. Her new vampire vision lit up the rough surface of the tunnel better than a flashlight would have.

She wasn't entirely sure where she was. They'd started out three days ago, she and Jack and his team of synthetic vampires, chasing a band of ordinary vampires through the hills and valleys outside a small town in the Appalachians. But they must have covered hundreds of miles since then. These vampires were wily and experienced, and they'd managed to evade their pursuers for a long time.

But now she and the others had tracked them down at last. Desperate, the vampires had taken refuge from the daylight in a system of caves that honeycombed the hills. It was the perfect time for Jack's synthetic vampires to move in for the kill.

Ahead of her, a boot scraped softly against rock. Meredith's body flooded with adrenaline. She was so close, she could feel it. This hunt was almost over.

She could see the end of the tunnel now, her sharp night vision illuminating where it opened out into the cave ahead. Her hand slipped on a stone, and Meredith froze, listening. Another sound: a tiny shuffling noise, her prey flattening himself to one side of the tunnel exit. She could hear a slow heartbeat, smell the cold scent of a vampire—so unlike the scent of humans.

Her new senses were an advantage here, not a distraction. She was using the meditation techniques they all practiced every night, breathing deep and counting slowly to focus her mind and shield her presence. The vampire at the other end of the tunnel stood out like a beacon to Meredith, but if she were doing everything right, and she managed to keep quiet, he would have no idea she was coming.

Pushing off with her legs, Meredith burst from the tunnel like a rocket. With a quick sidesweep of her leg, she took the vampire, an older man with scraggly blond hair, to the ground before he could even react. His mouth dropped open in surprise as he hit the cave floor. She could see so well, see the frown that creased his forehead and the tension in his muscles as he pushed himself back up. He wasn't used to fighting someone stronger than he was, she could tell.

In a second he was charging at Meredith. He slammed into her hard, his cool breath coming in fast little puffs. There was a swift stinging pain in her side, and her eyes filled with tears as she saw the shard of rock he'd used to cut her clutched in his hand. Blinking the tears away, she swung at him, slamming him back against the wall of the cave. His eyes widened, and she knew he had seen the long cut on her side heal itself already.

He stumbled, surprised, and then came at her with renewed, desperate vigor. She kicked at him, but he managed to trap her leg between his thighs, and they both fell, their legs tangled together.

Meredith's head hit the rocks hard, but she immediately started kicking and punching at the vampire above her. Jack chose to hunt the oldest, strongest vampires he could find, the ones who were the real competition for his creations. If this one managed to get away, it would be hard to find him again. He might escape entirely, the way Damon had.

Not that she cared about *Jack's* plan, Meredith reminded herself fiercely.

But no matter what had happened to her, she was still a hunter, and she would hunt. Vampires were still the enemy. From her prone position, she slammed a heel into the back of the vampire's knee, and he staggered.

Adam, another of Jack's team, burst through the tunnel entrance. Charging forward, he drove a stake through the older vampire's chest. With one long gasp, the vampire fell like a stone.

Meredith lay still for a moment and caught her breath. "Thanks." She shoved the body off of her and onto the floor. Climbing to her feet, she wiped the older vampire's lukewarm blood off her arms.

Adam, who was young and cute and blond, with a tiny spray of freckles across his cheeks, ducked his head and grinned at her, swiping a hand across the blood smeared on his chin.

"Want a hand getting him out?" he asked.

Together, they pulled the older vampire's corpse through the cave. Once outside, they dropped it on top of the pile of bodies the others had brought out. Meredith counted quickly and found all four there. That was it, the whole group they'd been chasing. She felt a bitter satisfaction: She might be *wrong*, might be different now, but she could still kill monsters, still make the world safer.

"Go us," Adam said, pumping his fist, and Meredith found herself smiling at him.

For a minute, it felt like they were what Meredith had always wanted: a real team. There were five of them, not including Jack, all young, fast, and strong. Meredith could have liked them, *would* have liked them, if they were true hunters.

But that wasn't quite what this was.

She was a *spy*, she reminded herself. She wasn't really one of them. She would never be one of them, she promised herself, not even if she never found the cure.

"Good work, everybody," Jack said, as he looked over the heap of bodies.

Adam and the others gazed at him in adoration, their eyes wide and shining, and Meredith felt ill. Even if she found a cure for what Jack had done to them all, the others were already lost. They loved Jack. They loved what they'd become. Sadie picked up a blood bag and sipped from it, faked a kick

at Conrad, her leg moving so fast it blurred, and they both laughed.

The hunt over, Adam picked up a can of gasoline and began to pour it over the bodies. They'd burn them to make sure they were dead and to keep curious humans from stumbling across a pile of corpses. Sadie and Conrad, hand in hand, wandered a little farther into the woods. Meredith was heading over to offer Adam her help when she saw Jack lead Nick farther downhill, holding tightly to his arm as if Nick might try to get away.

There was something furtive about them, and Meredith changed course to follow. She walked quietly, keeping her shield up as Jack had taught her. *Breathe. Count. Hide your aura.* They didn't glance back at her, but she was careful to keep in the shelter of the trees anyway. Her mouth dry and her heart pounding, she squeezed her hands anxiously into fists. Surely, now that she'd been changed, her palms shouldn't sweat.

When they were far enough away from the caves that even a vampire shouldn't have been able to eavesdrop, Jack and Nick stopped and began to talk, their voices low and their heads together. Edging to the other side of a nearby oak tree, her hands on its rough bark, Meredith stopped, too, and held her breath, listening hard.

She couldn't hear what they were saying at first—their voices were too low. She gritted her teeth, frustrated. Did she dare risk getting closer?

But then Jack's voice rose, furious. "What do you mean, you haven't found her?" he said. His face reddened, and with a quick, violent movement, he shoved Nick against a tree. Lanky Nick ducked back, twisting his body away from his leader.

"I t-ried," he said, his voice shaking. "I'm not giving up."

"She's got to be near here," Jack said, his tone dark. He leaned into Nick's face, spitting the words at him. "*Try harder.*"

Letting go of Nick, Jack turned away. Then, efficiently and viciously, he snatched a tree branch from the ground beside them and, in one smooth, quick movement, jammed it through Nick's chest. Nick screamed, an agonized wail of pain, and lurched away, clawing at the branch.

Meredith couldn't hold back her gasp of horror. *It'll heal*, she reminded herself, clapping her hand over her mouth.

Too late. Jack swung around, looking up the hill. "Meredith?" he called.

No. Her body tensed to run, but he knew she was there.

Meredith took a deep breath, smoothed her hair, and stepped out from behind the tree. “Hi,” she said, careful to keep her face cheerful and her voice light and unconcerned. “Um, we need your lighter. To burn the bodies.”

Behind Jack, Nick strained to pull the branch from his chest, giving a painful-sounding groan as it slowly slid out. “Nick?” Meredith asked, trying to sound confused. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Nick breathed, his eyes glassy. He wiped the sweat and tears from his face. The wound in his chest was already closing, but his shirt was stained with blood, and his voice hitched as if he was barely holding back a sob.

“Nick and I had a disagreement. I overreacted,” Jack said slowly. He was looking at Meredith with a speculative expression, and her stomach turned over nervously.

Digging in his pocket, he walked toward her. His eyes were fixed on her, curiously blank, and Meredith steeled herself, trying not to flinch backward.

When he was a few steps away, he stopped and held out a small silver object. His lighter. “Here you go.” When Meredith looked up at him, he smiled.

She forced her body to relax, and smiled back at him. Maybe he had bought her excuse. She would have to be more careful now, though, in case he was suspicious. That had been too close.

And who was the “she” Jack had been searching for? Meredith’s heart sped up, and she took a steadying breath, willing her pulse back to normal.

Jack had a secret. No matter what it took, she would find out what it was.



Matt cleared his throat and looked up at the clock on the wall of the ER waiting room, shuffling his feet with impatience.

The air seemed suffused with a combination of boredom and despair. People sat huddled together, pressing ice or bandages to themselves, or filling out paperwork with exhausted expressions on their faces. In the chair closest to Matt, a tired-looking older man held a cup of coffee with both hands as he leaned forward tensely, his gaze fixed on the door of one of the examination rooms. Matt looked away, shifting from one foot to the other, embarrassed by the naked fear in the man's eyes.

Still, that man would be helped here. They all would. That's what Jasmine did—she helped people. In that way, she'd always been one of them. They fought monsters to protect the innocent, and Jasmine *fixed* the innocent.

It was such an unequivocally *good* thing to do—no shades of gray, no occasionally evil vampire allies, no icy Guardians—that Matt's heart swelled with love for her. Jasmine, with her sweet, soft lips and her shining intelligent eyes, was good all the way through. And she loved him, too, despite everything he had seen and done.

Matt leaned back against the vending machine, looking at the elevators. Soon she'd be here. His heart fluttered in his chest at the thought that any minute now, those elevator doors would open and he'd see Jasmine.

His phone vibrated, and he took it out to see a text from Jasmine:

Come up to room 413. There's something I want to show you.

Matt rode the elevator up to the fourth floor, found room 413, and tapped lightly on the closed door. It immediately jerked open, and Jasmine smiled up at him, almost bouncing with excitement.

"Come on in," she urged, tugging him by the arm. She yanked him inside and closed the door behind them, then leaned against it, grinning.

"What's going on?" Matt asked, looking around. This was obviously

some sort of lab, full of shiny white-and-chrome equipment, none of which gave him the faintest clue to its purpose.

“Look at this,” Jasmine said. Leading the way across the room, she hopped up on a stool in front of one of the machines. She turned on a screen and began adjusting dials, her fingers moving competently over the controls. Two complicated-looking graphs showed up on the screen, one above the other.

“I have no idea what you’re showing me,” Matt said, staring at the screen.

“I ran an analysis of the two samples of blood I took,” Jasmine told him. “This is basically a genetic breakdown of Damon’s blood—” she pointed at the upper graph “—and this is the manmade vampire’s blood.” She indicated the lower graph. “They’re ridiculously similar. Much more similar than either is to normal human blood.”

“I still don’t know what that means,” Matt said apologetically.

“Long story short?” Jasmine arched an eyebrow, a pleased little smile on her lips. “Jack may have made his vampires in a lab, but he didn’t do it without help. There are all kinds of chemical and genetic modifications going on here,” she said, pointing to one edge of the lower graph. “But the basic structure of the blood shows that Jack didn’t start with just ordinary human blood. He used *real* vampire blood. That’s not in the lab notes Damon stole from him, but it’s definitely true. There was a first step he didn’t document in that notebook.”

“Wow.” Matt ran his eyes across the screen as Jasmine explained her conclusions in more detail. They still meant nothing to him, but he believed *she* knew what she was talking about. “It’s amazing that you figured this out.” He hesitated. “Is it going to help us kill them?”

Jasmine’s face fell. “I don’t know,” she said. “The mutated strands must be what keep them from being vulnerable to the things vampires usually die from. But I can’t—I’m not a geneticist.”

Seeing the disappointment in her eyes, Matt felt like a jerk. “This is great, though,” he said hastily. “The more we know about what Jack’s doing, the better.”

He was glad to see Jasmine’s lips tilt up again into a smile. And it was true. He had to believe that every bit of information they could scrape up about Jack and his vampires would bring them closer to killing him.



Raccoon, Damon thought, scraping his tongue against his teeth, *is even more disgusting than rabbit*. That was a fact he could happily have gone without ever knowing. He sighed and leaned back against a birch tree, looking up through branches at the stars, so clear and distant. The night forest was quiet around him.

He should just discreetly find a girl who would let him feed on her, as he had in his travels, but somehow he couldn't with Elena around. Even though he hadn't tasted her blood since after the fight with Jack, it didn't seem right to find another companion. Hence the unpleasantly furry entrées.

How had Stefan managed it, decade after decade, resigning himself to the blood of deer and doves and other woodland rabble? Damon bit his lip and then consciously relaxed, lounging against the tree, pushing the thought away. He wasn't going to think about Stefan.

Instead, he reached for his connection with Elena. It was better to think of her, of her soft skin and shining eyes, of her proud spirit and sharp, fierce mind, than to poke again and again at the painful scars left by Stefan's loss.

Her grief was still there, haunting the bond between them. It would never leave her, he supposed, never leave either of them completely. *But there was something else there*, he thought, *something gentler and warmer creeping into her emotions*. He thought—*hoped*—that perhaps it was the way she felt about him.

Licking his lips, Damon let the blood flowing inside him—disgusting, but full of the energy of life—warm him and quicken his Power. Elena thought Siobhan might be in one of the hunting cabins up here in the hills. So Damon was looking.

It probably wasn't what the Guardians wanted, as they'd assigned *Elena* the task of finding and killing the old vampire, but who cared what they wanted? Dead was dead, and he didn't like the idea of Elena following auras by herself, finding corpses in the night. She was strong, he knew, but she was still so young.

And he was ready to take someone down. His experiments in killing the synthetic vampires were at a standstill. Nothing worked, and his prisoner had taken to staring silently at Damon with dull, resentful eyes instead of fighting back. Restlessly, Damon touched his tongue to his sharp canines. He needed to *do* something.

He pushed his Power outward, searching, categorizing what he found.

There was life all around him. Small animals scurried in the undergrowth, an owl swooped overhead. He felt the quick nervous mind of a deer a few yards away and, farther on, a family of black bears searching for food. Humans down in the town below, sleeping or indoors. One walking a dog at the edge of the forest.

Nothing *other*. No vampire consciousness stirring. If Siobhan was in a cabin in the woods, it wasn't one of the ones up here in the hills past the edge of town.

Damon looked up at the stars again and thought about whether he should call another animal to him before he went home. He hadn't tried bear yet; maybe it would be less vile. All that fur seemed like it would be a pain to bite through, though, which might be even worse than the raccoon.

Or maybe he should head down into town, find a game of pool or a fight, make a few humans uncomfortable with a brush of his Power.

He had taken one undecided step toward the woods' edge when something stopped him short. Tensed, he held his breath and listened.

There was the lightest crackle, as if someone were carefully stepping across dry leaves. Suddenly, with a tingling shock of awareness, *wrongness* crept up on him, the faint chemical wrongness that was now all around.

Jack's vampires. Now that Jack knew Damon was in Dalcrest, they had been tracking him. The little vampire outside his and Elena's home hadn't been there by coincidence. He had been scouting, and only the fact that Damon had captured him had stopped more from coming there. And now they'd found him here, in the forest. If they were able to track him, they would pursue Damon the same way their kind had chased him and Katherine across Europe. Only now he was alone.

Pushing away a flare of panic, Damon stepped backward so that the birch tree was at his back once more. They wouldn't be able to come at him from behind. He stretched his Power, feeling for the shape of their minds. Even using his Power to its fullest extent, he could barely sense them. It was lucky he had just fed, or he might not have sensed them coming at all. There was more than one—maybe as many as eight or nine, the feel of them quiet but, once he'd found them, distinct from one another.

Jack wasn't among them, he thought, *nor was Meredith*. He knew the feel of those two minds now, and these felt like strangers. Just how many minions had the mad scientist created?

They were coming closer, almost close enough for him to see them. He peered into the darkness, watching for movement. There was a crackle of dry leaves somewhere to his right, but he couldn't spot them, couldn't find exactly where they were coming from. Growling low in his throat with frustration, Damon took one step to the right, glaring off into the tangle of trees.

The first vampire slammed into him from the left, unexpected, knocking him sideways. She was a young blond girl, no taller than Bonnie and probably a few years younger. She took advantage of his surprise, going straight for Damon's throat, her white teeth flashing in the starlight.

Damon caught his balance and grabbed a fistful of her thick hair, yanking her head back and away from his throat. With a quick motion, he managed to snap her neck. She fell limply at his feet, her face empty and innocent. It wouldn't keep her down for long, but she'd be out of the fight for the moment.

"Come on then, children," he said to the dark shapes he knew were just out of his field of vision, taunting them. "Are you monsters or cowards?" He hesitated and stared out into the darkness, feeling with his Power. Could he feel something now? The faintest shine of a rust-red aura in the night? "Dilly, dilly, ducks, come and be killed," he shouted wildly, an old nursery song popping into his head as he strained to pinpoint just what it was he was on the verge of sensing.

There. There and there. All around. They were dropping their shields now, he realized; he could feel them coming from all sides, pressing in eagerly. They weren't intimidated by how quickly he'd put down the little blonde. She'd only been an experiment, like poking a snake with a stick to see how fast it moved. A sense of grim satisfaction rose from them.

They weren't afraid of him, and, deep inside, this shook Damon. He'd fought monsters stronger than he was, demons and ancient vampires. But they'd always been cautious, a little wary, respecting him even if they didn't think he was a true threat.

But he didn't know how to kill these vampires, didn't even know how to hurt them properly, not for long. And they knew it.

There were too many of them, and he was alone. So Damon did the only thing he could. Between one blink and another, he pulled his Power fiercely around him, feeling his body violently compact. It was almost too much to manage with only animal blood in his veins, but he was determined. There

was *no way* he was going to be ripped apart in the woods with the taste of raccoon still in his mouth.

Just before Jack's vampires burst through the trees at him, Damon leaped into the air, completing the transition as he jumped. In crow form, he flapped his way above the forest.

They had gotten too close to him that time, he realized, tilting his wings to catch the night breeze. And they would never stop coming after him, now that they'd found him again.

He needed to figure out how to kill them for good.



“I wish Damon was here for this,” Elena said, staring at her own reflection in the dark window.

There are a lot of people I wish were here for this, Bonnie thought. Alaric had invited everyone to his apartment, saying he had new information to share. But “everyone” felt like a lot fewer people now than it ever had.

Bonnie pulled two more chairs into place around the table. Doing this made it so clear to her how many people they were missing. They only needed six chairs, maybe five: Bonnie, Elena, Alaric, Matt, and Jasmine. And Damon, *if* he showed up. Stefan was gone. Meredith was away, and Bonnie hadn’t heard from her for quite a while.

Zander and his Pack should have been here, but he was still acting distant, and Bonnie hadn’t seen the rest of the Pack for days. She’d texted Zander to come to Elena’s, but she hadn’t been surprised when he’d given an evasive reply. She didn’t know when he’d be home, where he was.

Six chairs. And it looked like the sixth one would be empty.

“Can’t you just do your whole soul-bond thing and call Damon here?” Bonnie asked.

Elena finally turned around and looked at her, shrugging. “He tunes me out most of the time unless it feels like something’s wrong.”

“Really?” Bonnie asked, distracted from her angst. She’d always figured that the bond between Elena and Damon made them perfectly attuned to each other at all times, an open connection of love and longing. Which was totally romantic. And just slightly creepy.

“I tune him out, too,” Elena said. “We’d drive each other crazy otherwise.” She looked a little wistful as she said it.

Alaric came in from the kitchen and handed them each a cup of coffee. “You won’t believe how much I’ve found,” he said.

Before Bonnie or Elena could say anything, they heard feet clomping up the stairs outside, and Alaric hurried over to open the door. Matt and Jasmine

came in, hand in hand. Bonnie's heart gave a twinge of longing. Where was Zander?

"Sorry we're a little late," Matt said, "but we have some interesting news for you."

Jasmine tipped her head up as Alaric kissed her on the cheek in greeting. "Have you heard anything from Meredith lately?"

"I just talked to her. She's with the hunters, tracking Jack. No leads yet. She'll let us know right away if they find him." Alaric smiled, still looking excited about his news, but he seemed tired, too. Bonnie wondered if he was having trouble sleeping without Meredith. Zander had been coming to bed later and later, and she found herself tossing and turning until he came. She wasn't used to sleeping alone.

"Where's Zander?" Jasmine asked, as Alaric herded them all toward the table.

"He couldn't come," Bonnie said, keeping her voice light. Jasmine just nodded, but there must have been something in Bonnie's tone, because Matt glanced up at her sharply.

"So I've been doing some digging into Jack's background," Alaric said, handing around photocopies of a newspaper article. The article was in English, but from a Swiss paper, dated five years before. The headline read WOMAN'S DEATH RULED ANIMAL ATTACK.

"You think this is Jack killing someone?" Matt asked thoughtfully. "Look at how they describe it. Her throat was torn open, she was almost completely drained of blood. Definitely a vampire."

Alaric shook his head. "Based on the journal Damon found, Jack's only been a vampire for three years," he told them. "But look—at the end." He tapped the last line of the article with one finger. *Lucia di Russo is survived by two sisters and her fiancé, Henrik Goetsch.*

"Okay..." Bonnie said. "Is this supposed to mean something? Because I don't get it."

"Henrik is Jack," Alaric said, grinning. "Once I managed to ferret out his real name through missing persons reports, I was able to find out why he turned from scientist to vampire."

"Pretty impressive detective work," Matt said.

"So was Jack—Henrik—*experimenting* on this woman? His own

fiancée?” Elena asked, looking horrified.

“I don’t think so,” Alaric said. “We don’t have any record of him having interest in vampires before Lucia was killed. I think this is when he discovered they were real.”

“And instead of being horrified, he decided he wanted to be one,” Bonnie remarked, feeling a little sick.

“I wonder...” Jasmine said eagerly. Her shining eyes flew to Matt’s. “We know he started it all with real vampire blood.”

Matt explained that Jasmine had used the lab equipment at the hospital to analyze the blood she had drawn from Damon’s captive. It was clear that Jack hadn’t, after all, just transformed humans into synthetic vampires with drugs and surgery as they’d thought. There had been a real vampire’s blood in the mix.

“What if it wasn’t just any vampire?” Jasmine asked eagerly. “What if it was his fiancée’s *killer*?”

“We don’t have any proof of that,” Elena said, leaning forward intently, her golden hair swinging forward around her face. “But whoever it was, he would have needed some kind of relationship with the vampire he got the blood from. Whether he forced them to give him the blood, or if they did it willingly...”

Alaric was nodding. “That vampire would know something about him.”

Matt shifted in his seat and let out a frustrated huff of breath. “But that doesn’t really do us any good, does it? If Jack’s going around trying to kill all the regular vampires, probably the first thing he did was kill this one. Even if he didn’t, we don’t know who the vampire was, and I don’t see how we’re going to find out.”

Elena raised her head and fixed Bonnie with a shining gaze. “Bonnie can do it.”

“I can?” Bonnie asked, thrown off balance.

“Sure!” Elena said. “If we still have the blood, you can do a locator spell. It’ll be easy for you, you’re so powerful now.”

Bonnie bit her lip, worried. “But the blood we have doesn’t even belong to the vampire we want to find,” she said. “It would be like trying to use your own blood to find your grandparents.” Her mind was busy, though. It *might* work. Blood was powerful stuff—even human blood had a lot of magic in it.

It was life, vitality, and connection. If she could follow those connections...

"I'd need some of the synthetic vampire blood," she said dubiously.

"I have that," Jasmine told her. She dug into her purse and pulled out a small stoppered vial. "I thought we might need it."

Bonnie met Elena's eyes and knew the other girl could see the ideas sparking in her mind.

"Okay, then," Elena said, grinning at her. "Tell me how we can help."

Under Bonnie's direction, they cleared the table and dimmed the lights. "Candles," Bonnie told them decisively. "Red ones, if you have them." Alaric was able to dig up one red candle and three white ones, which they grouped at the center of the table.

Bonnie headed into Alaric and Meredith's kitchen and pattered around, opening drawers and cabinets, until she found a marble mortar and pestle. She'd left some herbs here, a small stockpile for emergencies, and she dug around in the cabinet under the sink to find them. *Ground mastic and juniper berries would help with divination*, she thought, *and there was some sandalwood oil that couldn't do any harm*. Poke root was good for finding lost objects—maybe it was good for looking for vampires, too.

She dumped the herbs into the mortar and poured a little sandalwood oil over them, then mashed everything together with the pestle. Carrying it back out to the living room, she plunked it down on the table in front of the candles.

Elena handed her a book of matches and Bonnie carefully lit the candles, then reached to take the vial of blood from Jasmine. The blood had coagulated a bit. When she tipped it over above the pile of herbs, it trickled out, leaving a thick film inside the vial.

"Don't use it all," Elena breathed, hanging over Bonnie's shoulder. "What if we need to do it again?"

"I don't want to make the herbs too wet, anyway," Bonnie told her, capping the vial. "They need to burn." She handed the vial, a third of its contents gone, back to Jasmine, and reached for another match.

The blood- and oil-drizzled herbs smoked and sputtered, letting out a hissing noise as they slowly began to burn. Bonnie fixed her eyes on the smoke, watching the patterns as it curled before the bright candle flames. She slowed her breathing and let her eyes slip out of focus, a deep calm coming

over her.

Riding a surge of Power, Bonnie pushed outward, letting her mind expand. The red trickle of blood from the vial. Blood pounding through veins, drunk by vampires, passing from one vampire to another in an exchange of blood. Jack's hands holding a syringe.

She could feel her eyes rolling back into her head and her mouth filled with a metallic, bitter taste. In the distance, Jasmine gasped and Matt shushed her quickly.

Then it was like Bonnie was speeding through the night sky above Dalcrest, the wind rushing through her hair. She hovered over the campus, feeling the pull toward Pruitt House, her old dorm, where she knew the captive vampire was locked in the basement. *No*, she thought firmly. *Someone else. Further back.*

There was an immediate jerk at her consciousness, but weak and in more than one direction, scattered. *The other vampires Jack made*, she realized. There were a lot of them, more than she'd supposed.

No, she thought again, more firmly. *Further back. Older.*

For a moment, she thought it was hopeless. Her consciousness hovered uncertainly, and then started to slide backward. She could see herself from above, her red head tilted back, the black smoke rising from the mixture of herbs and blood toward the ceiling. She was falling back into her body. *No!* she shrieked silently, trying to pull away.

There was a sudden tug somewhere in her center, and Bonnie was rising again, flying faster, feeling light and buoyant. She zoomed over the campus, past Pruitt House, past the playing fields, and felt herself slow as she reached the stretch of woods on the other side of campus.

There was something—someone—down there. The blood was yanking her toward it. The sensation was stronger than what she had gotten from the vampires in the woods and somehow felt older and darker than the pull toward Damon's captive.

Down, down, closer and closer. The image was becoming clearer: a shadowy figure in a small room. Some kind of little house deep in the woods behind the campus. Through the window she glimpsed the bell tower of the Dalcrest chapel.

Satisfied, Bonnie let her concentration slip. Immediately, she was rushing backward through blackness, feeling like she was falling, and then her

vision cleared. Through the smoke of the burning herbs, thin and wavery now, the candles sputtered. Her friends were all watching her.

Bonnie cleared her throat, her mouth dry. “I know where the vampire is,” she said. “And it’s close.”



As they walked through the woods, Elena sent her Power questing out around her, trying to find some trace of the vampire Bonnie said was nearby. Nothing. Beside her, Bonnie moved confidently straight ahead, seemingly sure of their direction. The others followed, Alaric muttering a charm of protection, Jasmine holding a stake and Matt a long hunter's stave. The sun was rising over the trees and the birds sang loudly, waking up around them.

Matt cleared his throat. "I really think we should have waited for Damon before coming out here." He sounded nervous, and Elena didn't blame him. But they knew where the vampire who'd provided the blood for Jack was, and Elena couldn't just sit back and let this chance slip away. It had been hard enough to wait for daylight. They weren't total idiots—they weren't going to go after a traditional vampire at night.

Every moment before sunrise, though, Elena had felt anxious and jittery, ready to burst out of her skin. If she had been just a few minutes earlier at the drive-in, she could have caught Siobhan, could have saved the lives of that young couple in the car.

If she'd seen through Jack's facade just a few minutes earlier, maybe she could have saved Stefan.

"We can't wait for Damon to get back," she said, determined. "This might be our only chance to track it down and find out about Jack."

Matt's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard, but then he gave her a small smile and pressed forward. Jasmine's face was set, and Bonnie's small chin jutted forward defiantly. Alaric nodded at Elena.

We can do this, Elena thought. *We have to.*

The woods opened up into a clearing with a small house at the center, and they stopped at the edge, still sheltered by the trees.

"That's it," Bonnie said.

Hansel and Gretel, Elena thought. It looked just like the witch's cottage,

gabled and ornamented with a swooping roof. Scrollwork edging hung off the porch and windows. The cottage was precious and nestled deep in the woods. Elena wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans. There was something about this little house.

“Are we ready?” she asked, staring at the house. Its windows flashed, reflecting sunlight back at her. Did something move behind them? She tried to focus her Power to see if she could sense an aura there, but felt nothing.

“Maybe we should try talking to the vampire first,” Matt blurted out. They all looked at him, and he blushed. “He—or she—hasn’t attacked us. We want information, not a fight. And we know not every vampire is just going to try to kill you right away. Damon wouldn’t. Stefan and Chloe wouldn’t have.” Jasmine’s hand slipped into his, Elena noted. So Matt had told her about poor Chloe, his college girlfriend who had become a vampire and then died.

“You’re right,” Bonnie said. “I’m not sure how long we’ll be able to hold a vampire anyway, without Damon’s help.” She glanced at Alaric. “If we can put a strong enough protection spell over all of us.”

As they spoke, Elena’s discomfort was growing, vague twitchiness escalating to apprehension. She began to breathe faster, her heart banging against her chest. She focused on the first floor windows. They seemed ominous, like hooded unfriendly eyes gazing out at her across the porch.

“There’s something wrong,” she said suddenly. She was sure of it.

She had to get in there right now. Something inside her was opening up, and she felt hypersensitive to everything around her: the breeze through the trees, the chirp of the birds, the fresh morning smell of pines and maples. Most of all, the tiny house where nothing moved.

It was her Guardian Powers. Behind those blank windows, some innocent human was in trouble.

“What’s going on?” Bonnie asked her, but Elena was already striding out into the clearing, abandoning any attempt at stealth. She barely noticed the others hurrying after her.

The porch steps creaked under her feet. Up close, the gingerbread cottage was grimy and out of repair, the scrollwork trim cracked. Elena hesitated for a second, clutching her stake. She tried again to find an aura inside the house, but her perception remained frustratingly blank. The sense that something terrible was happening only grew stronger.

“We have to get in there *right now*,” she said urgently. She slammed her

shoulder against the door once and then again, grunting in frustration when the latch held. “Help me.”

Matt, stave in hand, took a running leap and kicked the door open. It hit the wall behind it with a crash, bouncing back toward them, and Elena shouldered it aside as she rushed into the cottage.

At first, the room seemed empty. The sun shone peacefully through the windows, falling on an empty sofa, a patterned rug. But the smell of blood hung in the air, heavy and overwhelming.

Elena turned—and froze in horror.

For a moment, she wasn’t sure what she saw. There was just a pattern of reds and flesh tones against the white wall.

As Elena’s vision cleared, the abstract bloodred shapes resolved to a hanging figure. A young girl, maybe fourteen years old, chained to the wall. She had been torn open, bright blood everywhere. Dark, glazed eyes stared unseeingly from a bloody face. Her hair was a honey shade of brown. Elena’s heart twisted with pity. She must have been a pretty girl, once.

Elena reached out and ran a hand lightly across the girl’s brow, as gently as if the girl could feel it. *As if gentleness would do any good now*, Elena thought bitterly, and bit her own lip hard to keep from crying. The girl was still warm, but her blood was sticky, drying. Once again, Elena was too late.

“Let me see.” Jasmine pushed in next to Elena, her strong, sure hands running over the girl’s body. Pulling off the ropes, she got her down from the wall and started CPR, but Elena knew it was useless. After a few minutes, Jasmine stopped and kneeled back away from the body. “He ripped her apart,” she said, her voice low with shock. “This wasn’t just for food. Whatever happened... he wanted to hurt her.”

Matt frowned. “Forget about talking to him. We’d better go back to planning an attack.”

Elena looked around the room. Blue curtains. Log walls, wooden floor. A stone fireplace at one side of the room, cold now but blackened with the smoke of an earlier fire. It was so familiar. *Not Hansel and Gretel, but Snow White.*

“Not him,” she told them, her voice a harsh whisper. “The vampire’s a *her*. Jack’s original vampire is Siobhan. My Guardian task.”

* * *

It was late afternoon when Damon landed on the sill of Elena’s bedroom

window. He balanced carefully on the slightly too-small ledge, his talons digging into the wood, and tapped hard with his beak on the window. Elena was in there, he could feel her, and he was too tired to wait.

The Power animal blood gave him didn't last as long as he'd hoped, not as long as a *real* meal. He could have flown for longer on human blood, but now his wings were aching and he felt dizzy and sick. He hadn't wanted to change back while he was out, in case another attack came. He wasn't confident he would have the Power to turn into a crow again.

Elena's quick steps crossed the room, and she yanked the window open. "Damon," she said.

He fluttered through the window, brushing her face with his longest wing feather as he passed, and landed on the wide soft bed before letting himself transform back into his real shape. Stretching out on Elena's smooth white sheets, he rested his head on her pillow.

Elena's face softened with surprise. "You're as pale as a ghost," she said. "Where have you been?"

Damon sighed. "The fake vampires found me. I didn't want to come back here until I was sure I'd gotten rid of them." Elena inhaled sharply, but Damon, closing his eyes, didn't elaborate. He wasn't sure if the false vampires had been tracking him, or if there were just a lot of them around, but whenever he'd been tempted to land, he had felt that strange metallic wrongness. Damon relaxed into the bed, rolling his shoulders back; he was terribly tired.

"Are you all right?" The mattress shifted as Elena sat down on the bed next to him. After a moment, her hand stroked softly over Damon's arm. "You need blood," Elena said firmly, and Damon opened his eyes to peer at her.

This still felt like something he shouldn't be allowed to do, not with Stefan dead. But Elena scooted closer and lay down beside him, pushing her silky blond hair back to expose the long creamy line of her throat. Damon didn't have it in him to resist her offer. Pulling her closer, he molded his body around Elena's. He could feel his canines lengthening, aching with anticipation, and he kissed her neck gently before he laid the tips of his teeth against it. His canines were so sensitive that he shuddered with pleasure as they touched her.

Elena made a soft, encouraging sound, and Damon bit down. For a moment, her skin was taut against his teeth, and then they plunged through, blood bursting rich and hot into his mouth.

With the blood came a rush of emotions: love, worry, guilt. Relief at being able to do something for Damon. Under everything, that same constant pounding grief for Stefan.

She was sensing Damon's emotions in return, he knew. He stroked her arm, sending her all the reassurance he could: He was fine, more than fine when he was with her like this. Sometimes he thought all he needed was this, was Elena and his connection to her. He let himself rest against her, felt his lips curve into a smile against the skin of her neck. *Elena Elena Elena.*

And then, unbidden, Meredith's face swam up behind his eyes, and Elena twitched beneath his lips. He was usually better at shielding his thoughts than that; he'd had centuries of practice. He'd gotten distracted too easily.

Private, Damon thought fiercely, half-hissing as he arched away, his teeth almost leaving her throat. He could feel Elena's confusion echoing through her blood and their bond. There was a sudden coldness between them, where there had been only tenderness mere moments ago. She began to pull away, and he tugged her back, close and warm against him, his arm around her.

He had promised Meredith, and now that he'd given his word, Damon couldn't bring himself to break it. Once a gentleman, always a gentleman, he supposed.

He ran his fingers comfortingly through Elena's silky hair in a silent apology, and worked his canines gently in and out of her throat, encouraging the flow of blood. Letting his mouth fill, he reached for his connection with Elena again. But she was holding back now. There was a strange hollow ache inside him, more than hunger.

As she pulled away from him at last, leaving him sated and warm with new blood, Elena wiped one hand across her neck. Damon's gaze followed her hand as it carelessly smeared a single drop of blood toward her shoulder. When their eyes met again, Damon felt an unexpected pang.

She knew he was hiding something.

[#TVD12Secrets](#)



Bonnie came down the hall of her apartment building slowly, dragging her feet. She was sure the apartment would be empty and that she'd be having dinner alone again. She'd given up on expecting Zander to be there.

As she turned the corner toward her own door, she stopped in surprise. There was someone kneeling in the hall outside her apartment, crouching to push something under the door. Bonnie's heart thumped hard, adrenaline zinging through her body, and then she realized who it was.

"Hey, Shay," she said, coming closer. "What's up?"

Shay, Zander's second-in-command, looked up, her hands half-crumpling the edge of the envelope she had been slipping through the gap beneath their door. "Oh," she said. "Bonnie. I was just leaving Zander a note." Her fingers scrabbled quickly, pulling the envelope back out from beneath the door. Standing, she stuffed the envelope into her pocket.

"Oh." *Zander's not home. Just as I expected.* "I can give it to him." Bonnie reached out, but Shay stepped back, away from her.

"Never mind," Shay said. "I'll tell him when I see him."

"But—" Bonnie gave up. Shay was already turning, her blond bob swinging, and walking away down the hall. She gave Bonnie a wave over her shoulder, not looking back.

"See you later, Bonnie."

"Or not," Bonnie muttered under her breath, unlocking the door. She tossed her keys on the hall table and kicked off her shoes before wandering toward the kitchen. The apartment felt quiet and still. She would have known right away that Zander once again wasn't home, even if she hadn't run into Shay.

In the dim kitchen, she drank a glass of water, and then absently arranged the flower-shaped magnets on the refrigerator door: red, blue, yellow, orange, red. The largest one held a note against the door.

B: I'll be back late. Z

She glared at the note, and with a frustrated sweep of her hand, shoved the magnets so that they made a skittering noise against the smooth white surface of the fridge. Zander's note fell to the floor. The note told her *nothing*. It was almost worse than if he hadn't left her any message at all.

And Bonnie wanted to talk to him, she needed someone levelheaded and laid-back—she needed *Zander*—to help her figure out what she should do.

When she had used the vampire blood to find Siobhan, it had pulled her along like a whirlwind. Back in high school, when Elena had been trapped by Klaus between life and death, Bonnie had used blood to summon Stefan and Damon back to Fell's Church. Ethan had brought Klaus back to life, and Klaus had brought Katherine, with blood.

Bonnie knew blood was dangerous and full of Power. She wanted her magic to be full of light and energy, something that pulled on the growing, striving parts of nature. *Good* magic, not the shadowy ambiguous Power you found with blood and violence.

Still, though...

It was scary. It was a *really* scary idea, one that made Bonnie a little sick just thinking about it. But she couldn't get it out of her head. Blood magic might be what Elena needed. If she could reach Stefan, talk to him one more time, it might give Elena peace, help to ease the grief she carried.

Bonnie crossed to the sink and ran herself another glass of cold tap water. Gulping it down, she stared at the wall and tried to clear her mind. It would be *worth* it, she told herself. Blood wasn't evil, after all, and she didn't want to use it for an evil purpose. This was important.

Setting the glass down in the bottom of the sink with a firm thump, Bonnie made up her mind. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and called Elena.

"Listen," she said when her friend picked up. "Don't take this the wrong way, but do you have anything with Stefan's blood still on it?"

* * *

After she got off the phone with Bonnie, Elena eased the bedroom door open and peeked in. Damon was asleep on the bed, his long black lashes heavy against his luminous pale skin. With his eyes closed and his cheeks still slightly flushed from drinking her blood, he looked surprisingly young.

Walking as quietly as she could, Elena crept through the room and to her closet. Damon shifted but didn't wake as she opened the closet door. He must

be exhausted; his reflexes were usually as quick as a cat's. Elena was glad he didn't wake. She didn't want him to see this.

Remember how Ethan brought back Klaus? Bonnie had asked.

Blood. It was all about blood. Feeling oddly breathless, Elena peered past hanging clothes, a pile of shoes, until she saw a crumpled paper grocery bag shoved back into the corner. Her chest tight with sorrow, she picked it up and tiptoed out of the room, clutching the bag against her.

She put the bag gently down in the passenger seat of her car and tried not to look at it until she got to Bonnie's.

When she arrived, she hesitated in the doorway, surprised. Bonnie had used a marker to draw a huge black pentacle across the kitchen table, with strange sigils carefully marked inside. Black candles were placed at each point of the pentacle. A brass bowl full of what looked like herbs and roots sat at its center. Bonnie stood beside the table, shifting anxiously from one foot to the other, her small face drawn with worry.

"That isn't going to come off," Elena said, numbly. "You've ruined that table." For a moment, the old wooden kitchen table felt terribly important.

"I don't care," Bonnie told her. "Did you find something?"

Elena handed her the bag. "I couldn't—" she licked her lips nervously. "I couldn't bear to throw out Stefan's shirt, or wash it. So I just stuffed it in the back of our closet."

"Oh." Bonnie looked down at the bag and then hesitantly opened it and pulled out the black shirt. Elena remembered Stefan wearing the shirt that last night, how soft it had been against her cheek the last time he held her in his arms.

Bonnie's nose wrinkled, and a slight rotting smell wafted across the table. Elena flinched. That smell was Stefan's blood. It had been long enough now that it was festering.

"You really think you can use the blood to bring him back, the way Ethan brought Klaus back?" she asked, her voice sounding thin and stretched to her own ears.

Bonnie bit her lip. "I don't think so," she confessed. "I don't want you to get your hopes up too high. Ethan had to use the bloodlines of all the vampires Klaus had made—that's why he needed Stefan and Damon, because they were what was left of Katherine's line. But Stefan never made any

vampires at all. I do think we can do *something*, though. Maybe we can bring him back, at least for a little while. Or contact him, if he's out there somewhere."

"Long enough to say good-bye," Elena said softly. Tears were forming in her eyes. "I'd like that."

"I'll do everything I can." Bonnie put the shirt down on the table and reached out to squeeze Elena's hand. "Is it okay if I cut this shirt? Just to get a piece with some blood on it." Elena nodded, and Bonnie let go of her hand and picked up the shirt again, along with a pair of silver scissors to snip at it.

Taking a glass of water from the counter, she dunked the cloth into it, and they watched as the water gradually turned a cloudy reddish-brown. Tiny flakes of dried blood floated to the bottom of the glass.

"Now I need some of your blood," Bonnie said, picking up a black-handled knife from where it lay beside the glass. Elena arched an eyebrow questioningly but held out her arm. The blade stung as Bonnie drew it quickly across Elena's arm. Bonnie held the glass so that a few drops of Elena's blood fell into the water and mixed with Stefan's. They both watched as the bright red of the fresh blood spiraled through the browner liquid.

"Okay, don't freak out, but I'm going to put some of this on you," Bonnie said. Elena nodded. Bonnie dipped her finger in the liquid, and Elena squeezed her eyes shut as Bonnie lifted her finger to Elena's face. The water was cold, and Elena shivered as Bonnie's finger traced lightly over her cheekbones, marking what felt like angular symbols on her forehead and below her eyes.

"We want to call him to you," Bonnie told her, and Elena opened her eyes again to see Bonnie tracing circles and runes on her own cheeks with the thin mixture of blood and water. When she had finished, she placed the glass on the table and lit the five black candles. Their flickering light highlighted the wet brownish streaks on her cheeks, making her look like some kind of pagan priestess. "Give me some Power."

Elena took a deep breath and tried to let her Power expand. Blinking, she could see her own golden aura entwine with the rose-pink of Bonnie's. Then Bonnie began to chant in a language Elena didn't recognize, something Germanic-sounding, and picked up the candle at the peak of the pentacle. Shielding the flame with one hand, she dipped the candle and ignited the mixture of herbs inside the brass bowl.

There must have been some kind of accelerant in with the herbs and

roots, Elena thought, because flames shot up immediately, blue and green at their base.

“*Koma!*” Bonnie said firmly. Her voice rose. “*Hitta heima! Koma hyrggr! Leita Stefan Salvatore!*” The flames burned higher, and with her last words, she upended the glass over them, dumping out the mixture of blood and water. The flames sizzled and went out, sending up a plume of black smoke.

The shadows in the corners of the room seemed to grow darker. A chill crept up Elena’s spine. There was a breathless feeling all around them, as if someone stood just outside their field of vision, waiting to speak.

Stefan? Elena strained her eyes, watching the shadows. Bonnie slipped a cold hand into hers, and they waited. Elena’s heart was pounding, and she held her breath.

He was coming closer, she was sure of it. She could feel him, that indefinable, comforting feeling that Stefan was somewhere nearby. It was like coming into a room and knowing he was around the corner, just out of sight. Elena’s mouth was dry with anticipation.

Slowly, the feeling faded. After a moment, the room grew brighter again. Somehow, it seemed emptier. Elena took a deep, rough breath, her hands shaking. It hadn’t worked, she realized. Whatever had hovered at the edges of the room had departed. Elena swallowed hard. *It hadn’t worked.* Nothing was going to work, she realized, coldness spreading through her. Stefan was gone. Forever.

Bonnie looked at Elena, her eyes wet, and took a great gasp of air, letting go of Elena’s hand. “I’m sorry, Elena,” she said.

Elena sagged against the edge of the table and closed her eyes. She shouldn’t have hoped, she knew. But, just for a minute, Stefan had seemed so close. Her eyes burned with tears, and one slid from beneath her lids and trickled down her cheek.

Immediately, she felt Bonnie’s arms twine around her neck. “I’m so sorry,” Bonnie whispered, her voice shaking.

“I know,” Elena said, bending to rest her face against the smaller girl’s shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m just—” Her voice broke with a miserable half-laugh. “I’m so tired of crying all the time.”

Bonnie sighed, and hugged her tighter. “I know,” she said, her voice thick with tears of her own.

[#TVD12Bloodlines](#)



Meredith watched carefully as two of Jack's vampires sparred. After a series of hunts, they were back in the warehouse where she'd first found Jack and joined his team.

"Again," she said, and they lunged at each other. Jack had asked her to help make them better fighters, and she hoped it meant he was starting to trust her, to depend on her. She was conscious of Jack shadowing her as she walked around the fighters. Even when she wasn't looking at Jack, she was hyperaware of him, a prickling at the back of her neck letting her know that his dark eyes were fixed on her.

Soon, maybe, he'd be ready to tell her his secrets.

Broad-chested, stocky Conrad went in with his fists as she'd expected, telegraphing his moves so obviously that anyone could have seen them from about a hundred miles away. Nick, lanky and alert, blocked each blow easily and repeatedly.

"Stop," Meredith said. She'd seen enough. Sliding between them, she put a hand on each side of Conrad's face. "You're looking where you're planning to strike. Keep your eyes on Nick's, and he won't be able to guess your next move so easily. Trust your peripheral vision."

Nick smirked at Conrad, and she stepped back so she could talk to both of them. "Neither of you is using your feet at all. You're more agile now, you need to trust that." She showed them how to do a roundhouse kick and watched as they tried it out, nodding approvingly when Conrad landed a solid blow, sending Nick stumbling backward, and Nick returned a solid kick. "Good."

She told them to continue sparring and watched with satisfaction as Conrad slipped a punch past Nick's blocking—they were learning fast.

Maybe tomorrow the whole group could work with weapons. She'd noticed that Sadie liked to work with a stake or an axe, but she'd have more reach with a stave or machete.

Conrad slammed into Nick, knocking him to the floor. "Nice, Conrad!"

Meredith cheered. “You took him off guard there.”

“Meredith, walk with me,” Jack said from behind her. “The rest of you, keep sparring.”

His face was blank, giving nothing away, and Meredith felt a trickle of unease. She followed Jack across the warehouse floor, wondering what he wanted. Was there something wrong with what she was teaching the others?

But when he’d led her to the other side of the warehouse—far enough, Meredith noted, that they had some privacy—Jack grinned. “You’re a natural. I knew you would be.”

Laying a heavy hand on Meredith’s shoulder, he looked steadily into her eyes. “You’re ready,” he told her. “I want you to lead this group of vampires when I leave them. You’ll be my lieutenant, my right hand.”

“When you leave them?” Meredith asked. “Where are you going?” She was careful to keep the panic out of her voice. If Jack left, what good would being with the other vampires do? How could she learn his weaknesses, find the cure for what he’d done to her?

Squeezing her shoulder, Jack smiled. “I’m going to go on with my research, of course. This—you five—are my youngest group. Once the others are ready to hunt under your leadership, I’ll go back to the lab. If we’re going to eliminate the older vampires, we’ll need larger numbers.”

Meredith nodded. It made sense, she supposed. Tracking and killing the toughest vampires was a difficult job. *And, usually, a worthwhile one.* If it hadn’t been for Stefan’s death, and for the fact that Jack’s people were just as dangerous to humans as any other vampire, she might have supported them. In a lot of ways, they were hunters, like she had been. Like she *was*.

Jack let go of her shoulder and tucked his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “So, if you’re going to be my second-in-command here, you need to prove that I can trust you, Meredith.”

Meredith nodded again. This was what she had been waiting for.

Jack looked at her searchingly. “Do you know where Damon Salvatore is? I know that Stefan was your friend.”

This is a test. Meredith was sure of it. Jack knew that Damon wasn’t in Europe.

But nothing she’d ever said to Jack would make him think she cared for Damon. She tried to think back over any conversations they’d had about the

Salvatore brothers, back when she'd thought Jack was a human, and a hunter. Stefan had mattered to her. But, even if she'd fought side by side with Damon, he'd never been her friend.

"I think Elena and Bonnie would have hidden him with the Pack," she said, her voice steady. It would have been a smart move if it was true, and if Damon would ever agree to be hidden. "They're strong and hard to kill, and they hate vampires. But they'd protect Damon; they've fought beside him before."

Jack nodded thoughtfully, rocking back on his heels. "That's a problem," he said. "Any ideas?"

"About getting past the Pack?" Meredith thought. If she really wanted to help him, what would she suggest?

Go after Bonnie. She shuddered at the idea. It would work, probably. Zander and the Pack would trade Damon for Bonnie in a heartbeat. But she wasn't going to make that suggestion, not even to win Jack's trust.

"Most of them can change no matter what the moon's like," she said instead. "But some of them need the full moon, and all of them are weaker when there's no moon at all. That'll be the best time to attack them." It was true, which made it the best kind of lie, and the moon was waxing now. If Jack wanted to go against the Pack for Damon, he'd have to wait. "I'd lure them out with a false attack and, once the Pack is engaged in battle, go after Damon with another group. They'll protect each other rather than fight for Damon."

"Interesting," Jack said. "That may be useful." He rubbed a hand across his cheek, his ring rasping against his stubble. Giving her a brief nod, he began to turn away.

"Wait," Meredith said, her heart thumping. "I wanted to ask you something." She focused on slowing her breathing and pulse through meditation, the same way Jack had taught them to shield their true natures from others. She couldn't let Jack guess how important this was to her.

"What's our end game here?" she asked first. "We kill vampires—regular vampires. Is that all there is to it?"

Jack smiled. "We're going to kill all of them. And then we won't have any competition."

"I like the sound of that." *Another lie that's true.* The hunter in Meredith beamed approval at the idea of killing all the vampires. "But what happens

then? When all the vampires are dead?”

Jack’s smile widened, and one of his eyelids dropped in a slow wink. “One step at a time, my dear.”

Across the warehouse, there was a scuffle and a shout as Nick got Conrad in a headlock, swinging him around.

“Is there a cure?” Meredith asked, her eyes fixed on the fighters. She kept her voice level, but Jack smirked.

“Do you miss the little human hunter you used to be?” he asked. “You’re better now, Meredith, and you know it.”

“I like to know everything,” Meredith said stolidly, not letting out a flicker of emotion.

Jack shrugged. “No cure,” he said. “This is who we are. Forever.”

He might be lying. Meredith swallowed hard. “Is it true that we’re invulnerable?” she asked, trying to sound calm and businesslike. “There’s no way to kill us? If I’m going to be in charge, I need to know our weaknesses.”

She glanced at Jack casually, trying to gauge his reaction. He looked thoughtful, his lips pursing, but not suspicious, she thought.

“Come on,” he said, suddenly, as though he’d made up his mind. He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled, almost yanking her off her feet and through the warehouse door. She had to race after him, across the gravel parking lot and through the thin scattering of trees and waste ground beyond, and then across the highway.

“Where are we going?” Meredith gasped. Jack kept running, his hand like a vise around her wrist, tugging her onward. The sound of rushing water filled her ears, and they finally halted on a bridge, the river flowing down below.

“The others won’t hear us here,” Jack told her, his voice low. “No one else can know.” His eyes were steady on hers, searching, his hand still around her wrist. Meredith could feel her pulse pounding beneath his fingers. She nodded, her face earnest. *You can trust me.*

Whatever Jack saw in her, he seemed satisfied. “Look,” he said, twisting sideways and bending his head so that the base of his skull was exposed to her. “See the scar there?”

Meredith could see it, a thin white line, maybe half an inch long.

“You’ve got one, too,” Jack said. “We all do. It’s where the injections were administered.” He shrugged, almost bashfully. “We’re *almost* unkillable, but we do have an Achilles’ heel. Nothing’s perfect.”

“So...” Meredith put a hand up to feel the same place on the back of her own head.

“If we are stabbed in that exact spot, we die,” Jack said flatly. “That’s the only real danger to us I know of.”

Meredith clamped down on the hot flare of excitement rising inside her. She couldn’t let Jack sense how she felt. But this was it. This was how they’d avenge Stefan, how they’d take on the latest threat. She had to let Damon know as soon as she could.

“I’ll be careful,” she said.

Jack ran a cold finger down the back of her arm, and Meredith shivered. “I know you will,” he told her, his eyes intent on hers. His fingers suddenly encircled her wrist, and Meredith barely kept herself from flinching away. She needed him to trust her, to keep trusting her. Instead, she smiled, thinking of the worshipful way Sadie and the others looked at Jack, and trying to keep the same look on her own face.

“Let’s go back and see how the sparring’s going, shall we?” he asked. “I don’t trust Nick not to slack off if we leave them alone too long.” Meredith nodded, and they turned toward the warehouse.

But Jack hung back for a moment, his hand strong around Meredith’s wrist. “You’re getting stronger and stronger,” he told her. “If you stay loyal—if you trust me, the future will belong to us.”

Meredith nodded again stiffly, the smile fixed on her face. Jack was watching her with something close to affection in his eyes, and she felt suddenly, dizzyingly sick.

This had all gone on too long, her time here with Jack and his vampires. She was disgusted by the blood and the killing and by pretending to have turned against her husband and friends and given up on her own humanity. Now it was finally going to end. Meredith couldn’t wait to betray him.

[#TVD12AchillesHeel](#)



The kid banged his fist against the bars of his cage, froth forming at the corners of his mouth, his eyes wild. His long black bangs flopped into his eyes and he shook them aside. “You can’t keep me here forever,” he snarled, his voice low and savage. “Locked up like this. Better to be dead.”

“Today’s your lucky day, then.” *Starvation didn’t seem to be killing the kid*, Damon thought, but he didn’t look good. His already skinny face was gaunt, his cheeks hollow and his bones sharp.

The young manmade vampire swiped suddenly at Damon through the bars, hands twisted into claws, and Damon dodged out of the way. Hunger didn’t seem to be making the kid any slower or weaker.

But now they knew how to kill him. Damon felt like he was fizzing with excitement. When he looked at the kid, he didn’t see just another vampire. He saw the synthetic vampires who had hunted him through Europe, who had killed Katherine. He saw Stefan’s murderer.

Nothing Damon had done, none of the staking and burning and starving had helped defuse his fury.

But now, finally, he was going to get to kill him. And, after him, the rest of them. Damon realized his mouth was watering in anticipation.

He could hear the others on the basement stairs. When Meredith had called Damon to tell him about the fake vampires’ vulnerable spot, he had told Elena, and of course she had called the others to join them. They’d try it out on the kid, and then they’d kill Jack.

Damon’s heart filled with fierce happiness. Finally, Stefan would be avenged.

They filed in: Elena, Bonnie, and Meredith, their arms linked, followed closely by Jasmine and Matt, hand in hand.

“He’s looking a little skinny, Damon,” Meredith commented lightly. She was clearly buzzing with excitement, too—and why not? What she’d been working for, spying on Jack for, was finally happening.

“It doesn’t matter now,” he replied, and watched the kid’s eyes widen as he looked back and forth between them, picking up on something different from Damon’s usual taunting. Did the young synthetic vampire know Jack’s secret? Damon thought probably not, and he shot the kid a private, vicious smile.

He turned his attention back to Meredith. “How did you happen to discover how to kill them, anyway?” *He* knew, of course, but he wondered what Meredith had told the others.

“One of the hunters down in Atlanta accidentally hit the right spot in a fight,” she answered smoothly. “Even Jack’s luck had to run out sometime.”

“I hope it works,” Bonnie said. “But even more, I’m just glad you’re *home*, Meredith.” She squeezed Meredith’s arm, her small face glowing with affection.

The others joined in, exclaiming about how they’d missed Meredith, and Damon took the opportunity to murmur, too low for any human to hear, “How’d you get away?”

Meredith glanced at him over Bonnie’s head with a wry smile. “I’m supposed to be looking for you,” she murmured back. “Killing you is pretty high on Jack’s list.”

Wonderful. Damon had been hoping Jack had other things on his mind.

The young vampire was watching them, frowning in confusion. He could hear them, and he could tell Meredith was like him, of course he could. No doubt he was wondering if she’d really turned against Jack. It seemed like Jack’s vampires were, on the whole, insanely loyal.

All the more reason to kill this one, so he never got a chance to report back to Jack.

“Stake,” Damon demanded, and Matt slipped one into his hand.

Before the young vampire had a chance to react, Damon had unlocked the cage and had one arm tightly around his neck, yanking his head forward to show the base of his skull. “Scar,” Damon said, seeing the thin white line, and shoved the stake straight into it.

The point of the stake went all the way through the kid’s neck, the sharp tip sticking out just below his chin in front. He gagged and choked, clawing at it, then fell to his knees, one arm still awkwardly pulled up by the handcuff connecting his wrist to the bars.

Damon stepped back and watched blood pool down the young vampire's neck and chest, puddling on the floor beneath him. The kid knocked the stake free at last, but slid limply farther down the bars, supported only by the one thin arm chained to them.

He let out a harsh, blood-choked breath, and his body stiffened, his eyes rolling back into his head.

Then he lay still. He wasn't breathing. Damon listened, and heard nothing: no heartbeat, no struggle to breathe.

"We did it," Meredith said softly. Her eyes were wide and shining with excitement.

"Wow," Matt said. "That was, um... surprisingly easy."

With a sudden jerk, the vampire spasmed on the floor, his eyes flying open. Then he leaped to his feet, his handcuff rattling. The gash in his neck was healing, new pink skin stretching across it. He growled and swiped at Damon through the bars. Damon, caught off balance, stumbled and almost fell. The vampire's sharp nails cut into his leg, and Damon shook him off, swearing.

It didn't work. Damon could feel Elena's leaden misery filling him, mixing with his own red-hot rage.

"I'm sorry," he said, desperately, and reached for her hand.

Then the back of his neck began to prickle uncomfortably. Something *wrong*, getting closer.

Jack's voice, as cold as ice, came suddenly from behind them. "Meredith, I expected so much more from you."

Damon whipped around.

Jack was at the end of the row of dusty cages, flanked by a crowd of his vampires. A long hunting knife gleamed in his hand.

"It was a trap," Meredith said flatly.

"Of course it was a trap," Jack said, his lips curling into a sneer. "It was a test, too, and you failed."

With that, Jack and his vampires charged.

Two of them, a stocky guy and a blond-haired girl, slammed into Damon, one on each side, the girl driving her arm against his throat while the guy swept a leg against Damon's, trying to knock him off balance.

The move felt like one of Meredith's to him. She'd been teaching them. *Wonderful*, Damon thought, grabbing the guy's leg and flinging him backward onto the hard concrete floor. The last thing they needed was a crowd of vampire hunter-trained vampires. He managed to snap the girl's neck, giving himself some breathing room, but he knew she wouldn't stay down for long.

Snarling, Damon looked around for Elena and saw that she was safe for the moment. She was in a corner at one end of the long row of storage cages, her hands extended. The air shimmered slightly around her. She must be making some sort of Guardian force field around herself, because no vampire was coming near her. As he watched, the shimmer around her expanded, encompassing the rest of their group for a moment, but then it shrank back. She was trying to protect them all, but it didn't look like she could work up the Power.

Matt had Jasmine and Bonnie backed into a corner behind him and was swinging a stave at the lanky vampire coming toward them, driving it into him again and again. The vampire flinched under the blows, but kept coming toward them, his wounds healing faster than Matt could inflict them.

Bonnie was fumbling in her purse, no doubt looking for a weapon. Matt was no coward, but the vampire was just toying with him—one quick move, and the human would fall. Before Damon could spring forward to save the girls, Meredith was there, slamming the other vampire against the wall and efficiently breaking his neck.

There was the rattle of metal behind him, and suddenly someone landed on Damon's back, thin strong arms twining around his throat. He automatically slammed his back against the wall, forcing a grunt of pain from his assailant. A sharp edge of metal—handcuffs, Damon realized—on his opponent's wrist pressed against Damon's throat. Someone had let the kid loose from his cage.

The young vampire was furious and half-mad with hunger. He clung on tight and bit down, working his sharp fangs savagely into Damon's neck.

Damon slammed backward into the wall again, trying to get rid of him. The kid's desperation gave him strength, though, and he held on tighter.

Distracted by the young vampire, Damon almost missed Bonnie's fierce gesture, her hands shooting up into the air. There was a burst of blinding white light and suddenly Damon was flying backward.

His elbow scraped painfully along the floor as the force of Bonnie's explosion shoved him along, but at least it had knocked the kid off his back.

They landed side by side, and glared at each other, both flat on the ground and gasping with effort. The kid's mouth was sloppy with blood.

All the vampires were on the ground, Damon realized. Jack was the fastest back on his feet, and he dragged Meredith up with him, his long knife pressed tightly against her throat. A thin line of blood dripped down Meredith's neck, soaking the edge of her dark blue T-shirt.

Everyone froze. Damon could hear the young vampire panting beside him, but he couldn't tear his eyes off Meredith, not even to snap the kid's neck.

"Go ahead," Meredith said bitterly. "Cut my head off. See if that'll kill me."

Jack smiled. "Oh, I know how to kill you," he said softly. "But that would be giving you what you want." His eyes flicked to Damon. "Immortality's quite the curse, isn't it, Salvatore?"

Faster than even Damon's eyes could follow, Jack stabbed the knife viciously down, cutting through Meredith's stomach. Then, he let go and let her fall. Meredith dropped to her knees, her hands desperately trying to hold the gaping wound together. Bonnie screamed, and Matt shouted, "Meredith!" sounding horrified. Damon only winced—that looked painful.

As they watched, the wound began to heal. In just a few seconds, Meredith's flesh was whole again beneath the rip in her shirt. Elena gasped, and Jasmine whimpered.

Jack's smile spread wider. "I thought you must have been lying to them. What do you think they'll say, now that they know you're one of mine?"

Bonnie began to chant in Latin, her voice hard and furious. A moment later, Elena joined her. She raised her hands above her head, seeming to draw on their energy, and a shimmer appeared above her.

Jack eyed them, and then grinned at Damon. "I'll see you soon, Salvatore." He snapped his fingers, and in a moment, his vampires were with him.

Damon pulled himself to his feet, ready to continue the fight, but Jack and his team were already gone. Damon could hear their footfalls, faint and far away.

Meredith, her face ghost-pale, climbed slowly to her feet. Her wound was already closing. She looked at her friends, who were staring back at her.

Eyes wet, she looked from one human to another, taking in their horror. Damon could hear her heart pounding and her shaky, panicked breaths.

“I—I...” Meredith grasped the edges of her cut shirt and pulled them together, as if to hide the evidence of what she was. But she’d been revealed. There was no way to hide it now.

[#TVD12TheTruthComesOut](#)



“You knew about Meredith, didn’t you?” Elena asked Damon. After the first shock of discovery wore off, she had tried to get Meredith to come home with them. Her friend had seemed so lost. But Meredith had slid away, saying she had to go home and talk to Alaric. She hadn’t held eye contact with Elena, either, her eyes flitting down, her face averted. Meredith was ashamed, Elena realized.

Now, Elena and Damon were alone in Elena’s apartment, side by side on the couch. She felt exhausted; she just wanted to lay her head on Damon’s shoulder and close her eyes.

Damon looked at Elena, assessing, and then nodded warily. “She didn’t want me to tell anyone.”

Elena paused. “Thank you,” she said sincerely.

Damon arched an eyebrow curiously. Clearly, thanks hadn’t been what he was expecting.

“Remember when I became a vampire?” Elena asked.

“Believe me, princess, that’s not something I would forget.”

“Me neither.” Elena shivered. It had been a bad time for her. Fell’s Church was falling apart around them and everyone had thought—had needed to think—that Elena was dead. She had been lonely and frightened and almost out of her mind at the changes she was experiencing. “You took care of me,” she told Damon. “Without you, I wouldn’t have survived. I’m glad Meredith had you to turn to.”

Damon tilted his head, staring at her, his midnight-black eyes unreadable. “I know you want to think I’m a good person, Elena,” he said slowly. “But I didn’t help Meredith through the change, and I didn’t protect her. She wouldn’t have thanked me if I had.”

Without really meaning to, Elena leaned closer to Damon. “You would have helped her if she’d wanted you to,” she said, sure that this was true.

The corner of Damon’s mouth turned up in a half-smile. “For your sake,

Elena,” he said softly. “Anything I do for any of them, for anyone, it’s for you. Always. You know that.”

She did know that. Deep inside, Elena was certain that she was the only one who connected Damon to anyone else, now that Stefan was gone.

The bond between them throbbed, sweet, sharp emotion spilling through it, and Damon leaned even closer to her. His lips were only millimeters away from hers. She could feel his cool breath. He moved closer still, his perfect lips parting.

Elena almost leaned in and took what Damon was offering. She *wanted* him, she did, and she could feel the love he would give her. But there was something cold and hard inside her, like a ball of ice in the center of her chest. If she did this, it would be moving on. It would be letting go of Stefan.

Elena pulled back. “I can’t,” she said. “I’m sorry. Stefan...”

With one swift, smooth movement, Damon was standing, turned away from her so that she couldn’t see his face. “Of course,” he said quietly. “He’ll always be between us, won’t he? Even if we live forever.”

Through their bond, Elena felt a sharp stinging pain. It brought tears to her eyes, but it only lasted for a few seconds before Damon muffled it, blocking the link between them to no more than a buzz. He still wouldn’t look at her.

Suddenly chilled, Elena folded her arms around herself. It was possible that they would live forever, wasn’t it? Un-aging, unchanging, forever young. Without Stefan.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. Damon nodded once, stiffly, and walked away, across the living room and through the door to the kitchen. A moment later, she heard the apartment door close quietly behind him.

What did I do? She pressed her hands against her chest, feeling a hollow, desperate ache inside. She couldn’t tell if the emotion belonged to her or to Damon.

[#TVD12BlurredLines](#)

* * *

Evening had come while Meredith sat on her and Alaric’s bed, waiting for Alaric to come home from teaching his class at Dalcrest. Dread pooled inside her. Half of her—more than half of her—just wanted to run, to get away before she saw him. She closed her eyes and clenched her fists so tight that her nails bit into her palms.

She had been waiting for hours. By the time she heard the front door open and close, the bedroom was almost totally dark, lit only by the streetlights shining in from outside.

Of course, Meredith could see perfectly well.

“Alaric,” she said in a small voice, unsure if he could hear her from the hall. He called back and then came to the bedroom.

“Hey,” he said softly. “When did you get home?” Even if she hadn’t been able to see the smile on his face, she would have heard it in his voice. “How come it’s so dark in here?” He reached toward the light switch, and Meredith stiffened.

“Leave it off, okay?”

“What’s wrong?” Alaric came closer and brushed a concerned hand featherlight across her cheek. Meredith pulled him down beside her on the bed and buried her head in his shoulder. She could hear his heart beating, as steady as the sea.

“What is it?” Alaric asked, pulling her against him. His body was warm and solid, and he petted her hair with one hand, trying to calm her down. Meredith realized she was shaking against Alaric, pushing her face against his shoulder. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” he asked again, sounding almost frantic now.

Meredith told him everything she could think of: how Jack had changed her, how long she’d been hiding it from him. That she’d lied, that she hadn’t been down in Atlanta with the hunters at all, but with Jack, being a *vampire*.

“I couldn’t stay here. I couldn’t trust myself.” *Around you*, she didn’t add.

Alaric was silent for a moment, and tears began to fall from Meredith’s eyes. She pressed her face against his shoulder again, shaking. His shirt was warm with his body heat, and she pushed closer, treasuring the last moments of contact. He’d leave her. He’d have to. How could Alaric love her, if she was a monster?

But then his arms went around her and held her tightly.

“We’ll get through this,” he promised. His lips brushed the side of her head, and she gave a choked sob, soaking Alaric’s shoulder with tears and snot. “There’ll be a cure. Maybe. And even if not, we love each other. We can handle this.”

Alaric's voice was strained, but he wasn't flinching away from her. And there weren't any lies between them, not now. She closed her eyes and sobbed into his shoulder.

She could still smell his blood, salty and metallic, as rich and mysterious as the ocean. But Alaric didn't smell like food anymore. Instead, he smelled like home.



Matt hesitated in the hallway, Jasmine's hand firmly in his, staring at the plain wooden door to Meredith and Alaric's apartment. His mouth felt dry, and he wasn't breathing quite right.

It was ridiculous, he knew. He wasn't *afraid* of Meredith just because she was suddenly a vampire. He'd been friends with Stefan for years, and he had a cordial relationship with Damon, although they weren't exactly friends. He'd even been in love with a vampire, poor Chloe, when he was a freshman in college.

Maybe his history with Chloe was the trouble. He *knew* how hard it was for a vampire to resist feeding, to stay a person instead of a killer. Chloe hadn't been able to, and in the end she'd chosen to die instead. Becoming a vampire, fighting against those new, violent instincts, could tear a good person apart.

Matt wasn't going to let that happen to Meredith. None of them were.

Jasmine leaned against him, warm and quietly reassuring. "Can't stand out here all day," she said, and Matt lifted his hand and knocked.

Alaric opened the door and smiled at them, looking so normal that Matt's heart gave a ridiculous hopeful hop. *Maybe everything's okay.*

But, as the door swung wider, he saw Meredith, slumped at the kitchen table, her head in her hands, and his heart sank again. Meredith was definitely not okay. She looked broken. Like she'd been fighting on, out of pride, pretending everything was fine, fiercely determined that none of them would know what had happened to her. And now that they knew, all that fight had gone.

Damon lounged in a chair on the other side of the table from Meredith, while Elena and Bonnie leaned against the counter behind him, their faces troubled. Out of the corner of his eye, Matt registered Zander coming in from the other room, moving with an easy, animal grace. But Matt's attention was fixed on Meredith. He couldn't believe she was a *vampire*. And they hadn't known.

"I can hear your heart thumping, Matt," Meredith said, not raising her head. "You're scared of me."

It was the flat bitterness in her tone that got Matt moving toward her; she was one of his dearest friends, he couldn't let her sound like that, feel that way. She looked up at him, her gray eyes wide and wet, and warmth flooded him.

"I'm not scared," he said, reaching out for her. She flinched away for a second and then leaned into his hand, her body as warm and solid as it had always been. "Meredith, it doesn't *matter*." She gave a tear-choked snort at that, and he reconsidered, squeezing her shoulders. "Okay, of course it matters, but you haven't changed. You're still the same girl who shared your lunch with me in kindergarten."

He could remember her so clearly at age five, tall and solemn, dark hair pulled into pigtails. On their first day, Matt had forgotten the lunch his mom had carefully packed for him, and he burst into tears in the cafeteria. Meredith had been there, calm and compassionate, giving him half of her peanut butter sandwich, a handful of grapes, breaking her cookie neatly in two. Matt had tagged along after her for the rest of that whole long confusing first day, confident that Meredith would look after him.

"I *trust* you, Mer," he went on. "Jack did something terrible to you—really awful, and God, I'm so sorry about that. But I'm not scared. Because I know that you're still the girl who was the only person I could talk to when Elena went to France that summer in high school and I worried she was going to break up with me. You're still the same girl who was the total champion of our fifth grade soccer team." His eyes were stinging, and he swiped a hand across them. "I know that girl, Meredith, and I know she's good all the way through. I'd never be scared of you."

Meredith gave a choked-off laugh and bit her lip. "I know—I know all those things about the past, Matt. But what if I can't help myself? I hear your blood pumping through your veins, louder than the words you're saying. You smell like food."

"They've always smelled like dinner to me, but I manage to restrain myself," Damon told her, with a narrow smile. "Mostly. And you're much more moral than I am, hunter."

"One more thing I know about you is that you're too tough to give in to anything like that," Matt said. "I've got faith in you. We all do."

"And we *are* going to help you," Bonnie said, folding her arms. Her

small chin was stuck out stubbornly. “Alaric and I are going to figure out a cure.”

Damon was the one who laughed that time. “The only cure for being a vampire is a sharp stake, little redbird,” he said gently.

“With my magic and Alaric’s research skills...” Bonnie’s shoulders rose in a tiny, hopeful shrug. “Maybe? Maybe we can do this?”

“I’ll help,” Jasmine said quickly. “He used science to make his vampires. Maybe science can cure them.”

Meredith’s eyes were brighter now, not quite so defeated, and Matt fumbled in his pocket. “I brought you something,” he told her, his fingers fastening around a thin chain as he pulled it out of his pocket. It was a cheap silver-toned bracelet with a heart frame charm.

“Is that from *prom*?” Elena asked, surprised.

The bracelets had been favors at their junior prom. Matt and Elena had gone together, and each sat at the table—which they’d shared with Bonnie and Meredith and their dates—had one in front of it, the frame ready to hold a tiny copy of the owner’s prom picture. Matt had kept his; he was the sentimental type. And he’d dug it up last night and scraped out the photo of his and Elena’s smiling faces, back before everything began. He spent some time in Photoshop, shrinking down another old picture to fit.

“It’s us,” Meredith said softly, looking down at the tiny picture. It was from the first day of college: Matt, Meredith, Bonnie, and Elena smiling up from the heart-shaped frame, arms around each other’s necks. And Stefan beside Elena, with them but somehow separate, his classically handsome face solemn. Meredith touched his face lightly with one finger, and Matt sighed. He missed Stefan. They all did.

“I thought if you had it, it would remind you of how much we love you. You’re one of us, whether you’re a vampire or a human. We’ll be here to help you remember who you are.” Matt licked his lips nervously.

“We believe in you.” Elena leaned forward to wrap an arm around Meredith’s shoulder. “And we love you.”

Bonnie nodded, reaching to pat Meredith’s back.

Meredith’s lips tightened as if she was trying not to cry, and then she blinked and looked up at Matt. “Thank you,” she said simply, and wrapped the bracelet around her wrist.

“Let me,” Alaric said, bending to work the catch.

“Touching,” Damon said dryly. “We all know the hunter’s as tough as nails, *she’ll* be all right.” His voice was flat, but his eyes lingered on Meredith with something that, to Matt’s surprise, looked almost like sympathy. “The important thing now is, what are we going to do about her maker? We know where Jack’s headquarters are, but we’ve got no idea how to kill him. And now he’s onto Meredith, so she can’t spy on him anymore.”

“Sorry,” Meredith said.

Damon’s shoulders rose in a languid shrug. “You tried. But what’s the next step?”

“The next step is me,” Elena said decisively. Her dark blue eyes were shining. “If we can’t beat Jack by fighting him, we have to figure out his weakness. Since infiltrating his camp didn’t work out, we have to find Siobhan.”

“But you’ve looked for her,” Bonnie objected.

Elena shook her head. “Not hard enough. I’ve been trying to pick up traces of her aura, and I’m beginning to think she’s left town. If Damon and I drive around the area, maybe I’ll be able to find something to lead us in the right direction.” She looked toward Zander, who had been hanging back, watching them all quietly. “While we’re doing that, can the Pack patrol Dalcrest and look out for vampires? Protect everybody?”

Zander nodded. “We’ll do what we can.”

Inwardly, Matt sighed a little. The Pack would patrol. Elena and Damon would hunt for Siobhan. Alaric, Bonnie, and Jasmine would search for a cure for Meredith’s vampirism. It would have been nice if Matt, for once, was able to really help.

But then Meredith looked up at him and smiled—a tiny, crooked smile, but a real one. “Thank you, Matt,” she said again, running her fingers over the bracelet. A spark flared in Matt’s chest. Maybe this time, it would all be okay in the end. Maybe.

* * *

Elena waited for everyone else to leave. When the others had gone, Damon pushed himself away from the table and looked at Elena expectantly. “Shall we hit the road?” he asked. “Start the hunt for Siobhan?”

“You go on without me,” she said. “I’ll meet you back at home, and we can get started.” He nodded once and strode off without looking back, as

sleek and graceful as a panther.

Still Elena lingered, standing uncertainly by the counter as Alaric began to collect glasses and take them to the sink.

“What’s up?” Meredith asked finally, tipping her head back from where she was sitting to look up at Elena, her long dark hair spilling across her shoulders. “You’re hovering.”

“Walk me to the door,” Elena said quietly. She didn’t want Alaric to overhear what she was going to say. Let it be Meredith’s choice first.

Meredith arched one elegant eyebrow curiously and, for a moment, looked just like her old self. She got up and followed Elena.

Elena remembered her transition as a vampire. All the sensations tugging at you, the ever-present hunger. But it must be harder for Meredith, because being a vampire, the one thing she’d been raised to hunt and kill, would be the worst thing Meredith could imagine. The look of devastation on Meredith’s face, the way she pulled in on herself as if expecting a blow, hurt Elena to see.

And yet...

It wasn’t *all* bad, was it? Elena didn’t like to think about the fact that, except for Damon, her friends were getting older and she... wasn’t. They would become middle-aged, maybe have kids, get old. They would die.

But not Elena. And not Meredith. Not anymore. Wasn’t that something to be thankful for?

“Here,” Elena said softly. She felt in her purse and drew out a half-full water bottle. It felt the same as any other bottle of water in her hand, but the liquid inside shimmered, a tiny touch of gold to it. Meredith’s eyes widened.

“Is that...?” she asked hesitantly, and Elena nodded.

“It’s from the Fountain of Eternal Life and Youth,” she said. “I thought...” She felt weirdly uncomfortable. “For Alaric. Just in case. It’s hard, when one of you ages and the other doesn’t. I know, for me and Stefan...”

Elena hesitated again. It had been the right choice for her at the time. She hadn’t wanted to grow old while Stefan, by her side, stayed young and healthy, year after year.

When she had drunk the water, in a room filled with candlelight and sweet-smelling flowers, she had been filled with joy. She had chosen Stefan,

and that was the moment of her promise—more than that, her sacred vow: They would be together, for eternity.

But now she was *alone*. Forever.

Elena's breath hitched. She shook off the feeling. It wouldn't be like that for Meredith and Alaric.

But Meredith stepped back, tucking her hands behind her back as if she was afraid to touch the bottle. Her lips were parting to speak, but then Alaric came down the hall. Elena could see from his face that he had overheard, after all.

"Thank you," he said, and took the bottle from Elena's hand. "Just in case."

Elena hugged them both, briefly, and left them alone. She hoped she'd made the right decision. But Elena couldn't make the choice for them.

It wasn't the same, Elena knew that now. Not aging, not changing. The idea of living forever without Stefan hurt her, a deep sore ache that never left her for a moment. If she'd known that she'd be without him, she wouldn't have drunk the waters. She would have chosen to live a normal life, to grow old, to grow up, to die.

But things would be different for Meredith and Alaric. And if Elena and Damon could find out Siobhan's secrets, if they could somehow find a cure for this artificial vampirism that infected Meredith, they would never have to make that choice. Meredith and Alaric would both be human again and could grow old together. She knew that was what Meredith would choose, if she had the chance.

Elena straightened her shoulders and walked more swiftly down the hall, the heels of her boots clicking determinedly. She didn't want to leave Meredith's side, not when she was suffering. But if Elena's mission was successful, then perhaps Meredith's suffering could end.

[#TVD12ForeverYoung](#)



The street lamps threw pools of light onto the dark sidewalk, and Bonnie and Zander walked from shadow to light to shadow, hand in hand. The day had been hot, but in the fifteen minutes or so since they'd left Meredith and Alaric's apartment, it had gotten chilly. It felt like it was going to rain, and Bonnie shivered.

She snuck a peek at Zander out of the corner of her eye as they went, but his face was shadowed, the lights shining off his white-blond hair, and she couldn't read him.

"Poor Meredith," she said, hesitantly. Why did she feel so awkward talking to him suddenly? This was *Zander*.

"Mmm-hmm," Zander said, not looking at her. He was gazing straight ahead, intently, a tiny crease between his eyebrows, as if he was thinking hard.

He'd barely said anything at Meredith's, hanging back when he should have been participating, *helping*. She opened her mouth to say something—anything—and closed it again. She squeezed his hand instead, but he didn't seem to notice.

They turned and began to walk past the botanical gardens toward home. A breeze blew Bonnie's hair across her face, and the warm smell of summer roses came through the fence, a heavy, seductive scent. It could have been such a romantic moment that tears rose in Bonnie's eyes. *On a night like this, everything should be perfect.*

Bonnie stopped dead under a streetlight.

"What is it?" asked Zander, coming to a halt beside her.

" 'What is it?' " Bonnie mimicked. She was furious suddenly, adrenaline pumping through her. "You've been acting like a total weirdo for days! And now you're not even talking to me?"

Zander blinked. "What?" His face was washed out by the pale light, his gorgeous blue eyes looking gray.

“Don’t you ‘what’ me!” Bonnie snapped. “God, Zander, I thought you were braver than just blowing me off. If you want to break up with me, just do it.” Hot tears were beginning to stream down her cheeks, and she could feel her nose starting to run. She was an ugly, messy crier, and she hated it. “You’re being a jerk,” she said thickly, letting go of Zander’s hand to wipe her eyes with her arm.

“Bonnie—no,” Zander sounded desperate. “I don’t want to break up with you. I—this isn’t the way I planned it.” He took her hand again, tightly, and pulled her farther down the sidewalk, then through the gate to the botanical garden.

The scent of the roses was even stronger here, almost dizzying. Leaves brushed against Bonnie’s arms as Zander led her to a bench beneath an arch of climbing white roses.

“What’s going on?” Bonnie asked, sitting down, wiping at her eyes again. Fallen rose petals dotted the bench, and she flicked some of them off. A soft rumble of thunder came from far away.

Zander dropped to his knees in the dirt at her feet. “I don’t want to break up with you, Bonnie. I want to marry you.”

All the air rushed out of Bonnie’s chest. She opened her mouth to say something, but all she could do was squeak. Yes. Yes.

She reached forward and pulled him toward her. Zander shuffled closer, still on his knees. Their lips met, and a warm thrill shot through her. *Here you are.* This was the Zander she’d been looking for, his lips quirking into a smile and his eyes wide and loving and fixed on her, *seeing* her again.

“Wait,” he said, breaking the kiss. “I’ve got—I’ve been carrying it around, waiting for the right time.” He dug in his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box.

It was a ring. An amazingly gorgeous ring, shiny and bright, one big round-cut glittering stone on a golden band. “Will you?” Zander asked, holding it out.

“Okay,” Bonnie said. She was still breathless, but she could speak now, and she was absolutely sure. She was smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. There was nothing she wanted more than to marry Zander. “Okay. I’d love to marry you.”

She was purely, blindingly happy. And behind that white glow of joy was a contented planning hum: *have to call my mom, bridesmaids—Elena and*

Meredith and my sisters all look good in blue, big fluffy white dress.

But Zander didn't slide the ring onto her finger. He stayed on his knees looking up at her. "I need to tell you something first." He licked his lips nervously and reached out to take her hand again. "The Pack has to leave Dalcrest. I want you to come with us."

Bonnie felt her mouth drop into an O of surprise. "What? Come where?"

Running his free hand through his hair, Zander sighed and sat back on his heels. "I've tried to find a way out of it. I didn't want to have to tell you unless it was definite. I appealed to the High Wolf Council, but they said we'd been here a lot longer than they'd originally planned. They've cut me a lot of slack because I'm the Alpha and I wanted to stay, but now they say there's trouble in Colorado and they want us there."

"There's trouble *here!*" Bonnie said indignantly.

"I know. But it's Pack stuff. In the end, I'm sworn to them, and I have to do what they say. The whole Pack has to go where we're needed." He squeezed her hand tightly and looked back up at her, his eyes pleading. "Come with us. Marry me. I don't want to lose you, Bonnie."

Bonnie couldn't breathe. And it wasn't with the happy surprise of a few moments ago. Instead her throat seemed to be closing up. She felt like she was going to die.

Colorado. Colorado was *really* far away.

The first tiny drops of rain hit her arms, one cold drop and then another. Wind blew through the rose arch and showered damp white petals down over Bonnie. One hit her face, a delicate blow, and she peeled it off her own cheek, soft and wilted.

It was beginning to rain more steadily, and the cold raindrops loosened Bonnie's tongue and let her start thinking again. "I can't. Zander, I can't." He was staring at her, his eyelashes wet with rain. "I love you, but how could I leave here with everything that's going on? Meredith's a vampire. Stefan's dead. My friends *need* me here."

Zander leaned closer, put a hand on Bonnie's knee to steady himself. "I need you," he said softly, almost whispering.

Rain plastered Bonnie's hair against her forehead and ran down her cheeks, feeling almost like tears. "Please, Zander, I can't."

Zander's eyes closed for a second, long pale eyelashes fanning against

his cheeks, and then he opened his eyes, let go of her hand, and stood. “I understand,” he said, his voice flat. “I’ll go tomorrow, okay? I don’t want to make things tense for everybody. Some of the guys can stay and patrol for a few days, until Damon and Elena are back.” Standing above her, he seemed impossibly tall. Bonnie couldn’t get a good look at his face, but his hands were clenched tightly. He backed away from her for a few steps, then turned and headed for the gate out of the botanical gardens, walking slowly with his head down.

Water was running down her arms, soaking her clothes. A white rose petal clung limply to the back of her hand, and Bonnie stared at it numbly, seeing the curve at its base, the line of brown at its edge. There was a terrible ache in her chest. Bonnie realized she was feeling her heart break.

[#TVD12TheProposal](#)



It had rained all night and through the day, and now it was late afternoon, the cloudy gray sky gradually getting darker. Damon drove his gleaming black car down the highway and let his Power loose around him, trying to sense if anything supernatural lurked in the woods on either side of the road. There was nothing, just the gentle hum of nondescript human minds from the cars on the road and the towns they swept by.

“There’s just a trace,” Elena said from the passenger seat beside him. She leaned forward and peered out through the windshield. “It’s very faint, but I think she kept heading north.”

They’d been on the road all day. Elena swore they were following slight signs of Siobhan’s aura. Damon couldn’t see them himself, but he trusted her. She’d always been clever. Terribly, frighteningly young, but clever. And he could feel her intentness coming through the bond between them, the careful way she scanned their environment, her excitement when she caught a glimpse of Siobhan’s aura trail. Sitting so close to her, he was more aware of her emotions than ever.

And now he was feeling something else from her. Hunger. He was about to comment, when she stretched, and said, “Let’s get something to eat.”

Damon felt his mouth twitch up into the beginnings of a smile—he’d read her so well—and he took the next exit. He drove a little farther, until they came to a likely looking diner. They pulled into the parking lot and climbed out, glancing up at the sullen glow of the low-hanging sun through the clouds. It would be evening soon, and it didn’t feel like they were getting much closer to their goal.

Crossing to the other side of the car, he opened Elena’s door for her. “Come on, princess,” he said. “The quest will wait while you have a cheeseburger.”

Inside the diner, gingham tablecloths covered each table, folk art pictures of roosters and ducks hung on the walls, and a child’s toy—an Etch-a-Sketch, Magic 8 Ball, or game—sat on each table.

“Aw, this is charming,” Elena said as the waitress, wearing a ruffled apron, led them to a table for two.

“The word you’re looking for is cloying,” Damon told her. The waitress glanced back at him, and he shot her a blinding smile.

Elena ordered a sandwich and iced tea, but Damon didn’t feel like eating. Human food gave him no nourishment, and there was nothing on the menu he was in the mood to sample. There was a low ache of hunger in his stomach, though, and he ran his tongue over his sensitive canines. He could last a little longer before he hunted, he supposed. He wasn’t desperate enough yet for fur or feathers in his mouth. “Just coffee, please,” he told the waitress.

“Want to play checkers while we wait?” Elena asked, stacking the red and black pieces across the miniature game board sitting on their table.

“Checkers?” Damon said with slight distaste.

“Sure, it’ll be fun.” Elena said. Damon hesitated for a split second, and Elena’s eyes widened. “You don’t know how to play checkers?”

“You’d be amazed how often it doesn’t come up,” Damon said dryly.

“Still,” Elena said. “You’re more than five hundred years old. You never learned? Five-year-olds can play checkers.”

“They didn’t when I was five,” Damon snapped. He felt ridiculously embarrassed—it wasn’t like he wanted to play a child’s game. “I can play chess.”

“I suppose that *is* much more suave and creature-of-the-night,” Elena agreed thoughtfully. “Come on, let me show you. Checkers is easy.”

There was a teasing glow in her eyes, and Damon couldn’t resist her. The checkers clicked together as she stacked them, and he took a moment to bask in the warmth coming through the bond between them. She still loved Stefan, he knew it, but she cared for Damon, too. “Go ahead,” he told her. “Whatever you want.”

Elena shot him a quick, triumphant grin. “Okay,” she said brightly, laying the checkers out on the board between them, black ones in front of Damon, red ones in front of herself. “So, you move diagonally forward, only on the dark squares. And if you’re next to one of my pieces and there’s an empty space on the other side, you can jump over it, and capture it. When you get to my side of the board, your piece gets kinged and can move forward *and* backward. You win if you get all my pieces off the board.”

"I see." Damon sat back and regarded the board thoughtfully, pushing back the little swell of glee inside him so that Elena wouldn't feel it through their bond. This game was just Alquerque, which had already been old when he was a child, only played on a chessboard. "I think I can handle it."

Elena went first, and Damon bided his time for several moves. Then she jumped two of his pieces, sitting back with a smirk. "And that's how you do it," she said, pleased with herself.

"Impressive," Damon said coolly, eyeing a hole she'd left in her defenses. Instead of taking advantage, he ignored the opening and moved another piece forward.

It was good to see Elena enjoying herself for a moment. She'd been too sad for too long. *Maybe*, Damon thought. *Maybe someday she'll get over Stefan*. It was a betrayal of his little brother, but he couldn't help the flush of hope the thought gave him. After all, Damon had all the time in the world to wait.

"You'll get it," Elena said encouragingly, taking another one of his pieces. "Checkers isn't hard, I promise." There was a smug little curl at the edge of her lips.

"Indeed," Damon said. He could hear the waitress at the counter behind him, smell the warm salt of Elena's fries. Lunch was ready. He leaned forward and jumped four of her men with a satisfying series of clicks. "King me."

Elena blinked at the board, and Damon let a smile spread over his face. "You must be a wonderful teacher," he told her.

* * *

Elena's cheeks were prettily flushed, and she glanced up at him through her lashes as they crossed the parking lot together. Her arm pressed against his, and Damon was gloriously aware of the heat coming off her silky skin.

"You're a quick learner," she commented. "I can't believe you won every game."

Damon vaguely noted a few figures at the edge of the parking lot, looking toward them, and checked absently—*human, harmless*—his attention fixed on Elena. He watched as they got into their car and drove away. He'd been right: human.

"My life's been long enough—" he began, and then a heavy body slammed into him, low and hard, knocking the breath out of him.

Vampires.

Damon hit the ground and rolled, grappling with the synthetic vampire above him. His back scraped painfully against the asphalt of the parking lot. A heavy, dark-skinned, muscular man, older than most of Jack's protégés, snarled down at him, his teeth sharp and glaringly white against his skin.

"Damon!" Elena shouted.

The vampire pressed forward, his teeth scraping at Damon's throat, and Damon yanked away. The vampire's body was warm, as warm as a human's, and his breath was hot and fetid, like something rotten. Damon shoved at him, trying to get some leverage to snap his neck. But his weight was too much—his canines sank into Damon's throat, tearing at it.

The bite burned like fire, and Damon thrashed, trying to get free.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught more movement. Another vampire. Two vampires. *No*.

With a fresh surge of strength, Damon struggled harder, rolling over and slamming the larger vampire down against the asphalt of the parking lot. He needed to get up before the other two got to Elena. Maybe they couldn't kill her, not with their bite, but they could *take* her, and Jack knew Elena's secret. It was unlikely that she'd be able to raise her Guardian Powers against them—they weren't her target, and she had no time to coax her Power to the surface.

He and the artificial vampire were gripping each other tight now, straining against each other. The other vampire's muscles bulged with effort. Slowly, his teeth gritted, Damon forced his opponent's arms back down and pinned them against the pavement, enjoying the expression of shock on his face.

He snapped the other vampire's neck quickly and watched as his eyes glazed over. That would keep him down for a little while. Damon leaped gracefully to his feet.

As he turned, he heard a heavy thump. Behind him, a tall light-haired vampire had fallen at Elena's feet, a stake protruding from his chest. The third vampire, a woman, hesitated, staring at Elena.

Before the fallen recovered, Damon took two long steps over and snapped her neck quickly. "That'll knock her out longer than the stake," he told Elena, and bent to snap the neck of the third vampire as well.

“We’d better get out of here while we can,” Elena said. She bent to tug her stake, with an audible huff of effort, from the tall vampire’s chest. Efficiently, she wiped it on a tissue and tucked the stake back into her purse.

“Nicely done,” Damon said, trying to gauge her mood. She didn’t seem frightened, and there was nothing but adrenaline-fueled excitement and a certain smug pleasure coming through their bond. “You don’t need too much protecting, do you, Guardian?” Elena smirked at him, and he felt her spark of pride.

Then her face fell. The pride shifted to shock, then fear. “You’re hurt,” she said.

“Oh,” Damon said, reaching up to touch the bite. The blood was still trickling down his neck, hot and painful. He’d forgotten for a moment in his concern for Elena. “I’m all right.”

“No,” Elena said. “Come here.” She leaned back against the side of the car and pulled open the neck of her shirt, brushing back her hair from her throat. She cocked her head invitingly.

He could see the delicate veins beneath her skin, and his breath caught. Elena would be so soft, he knew, her neck like warm satin beneath his lips and teeth. And her blood was rich and sweet.

“Hurry,” she said urgently. “They’ll be waking up soon.”

Damon *wanted*. He really did.

But he swallowed and dragged his eyes away from her, licking his lips.

When he’d fed from her before, she’d turned away from him. She hadn’t wanted him to see inside her mind, hadn’t wanted him any closer than the bond between them already brought them.

He didn’t just want her blood. When he drank from Elena, he didn’t want it to be about *food*.

“No thank you, princess,” he said. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t be chivalrous, Damon,” Elena said, irritated. “You need this.”

Damon stared down at his feet. “Better not,” he said. “We need to get going.” He took a quick breath, and then looked up at Elena again, shooting her his most brilliant smile. “I really am perfectly fine. It’s healing already.” He brought his hand up to his neck, and found that it was true: The bite was messy and painful, but the wound was clotting.

Before she could argue, he opened his car door and reached over to unlock hers. Once they were in, he pulled out, tires squealing. The false vampires were already beginning to stir.

Elena felt a bit petulant, he thought, cautiously checking their bond—his princess liked everyone to fall in line with her plans—and he concentrated on shutting down the connection between them, trying to broadcast only thoughts about the road ahead.

He didn't know if she could feel the small bitter ache in his chest, but he surrounded it with layers of *don't ask* and *private* and hoped she would mind her own business.

"You're being an idiot," Elena told him sharply. Damon winced and didn't answer. The warmth that had echoed through their bond earlier was gone.

He couldn't bear to drink from her anymore.

It was an exquisite torture, tasting her sweetness, reaching out for her mind, her soul—only to have Elena pull away. Sharing blood like that should be for lovers, the most intimate connection there was.

Damon was tired of letting himself pretend. Stefan—his irritating, noble, beloved little brother—was dead, but he still occupied Elena's heart. And if Damon couldn't have that place, if that part of Elena was going to be closed to him, he had to let it go.

[#TVD12AllorNothing](#)



“Let’s get just one more vial,” Jasmine coaxed, and Meredith held out her arm.

“Don’t you think you’ve taken enough blood today?” Matt asked, his forehead crinkling with concern. “You’re turning her into a pincushion.”

“It’s fine,” Meredith said tiredly. She hadn’t fed properly for days—just the occasional bird or beast—and her jaw ached. She felt slightly sick, and the smell of the blood flowing beneath Matt and Jasmine’s skin made her lightheaded. She blinked and tried to focus on what they were saying, which had been much easier when she was with Jack and the others. The regular human blood diet had kept her sharp.

Maybe Jasmine could hook her up with blood from the hospital.

Tightening her lips, Meredith shook her head sharply. She could control her cravings.

She had to remember what this was all about. Jasmine was going to find a *cure*. Meredith didn’t need access to stolen blood—she needed to be human again.

Jasmine drew blood from Meredith’s arm and took a few drops into a pipette to put into a blocky white machine. “I don’t know,” she said, frowning. “I’ve separated your blood out in the ultracentrifuge, and I’ve tried electrophoresis, and analyzed it every way I could think of. I can *see* that there are differences, and I can get some information on *how* you’ve changed, but I just don’t know what Jack did to make it happen.”

“Doesn’t his journal tell you?” Matt asked, picking up the leather-bound book and flipping through its pages. Damon had lent it to Jasmine to help with her research.

Jasmine’s mouth scrunched. “It’s big on the effects he observed, but he doesn’t really detail the exact procedures he used to get there. It’s not a *scientific* journal.”

“I’m sorry I don’t remember more,” Meredith told her. “But it was all

like a dream. He injected me with hypodermics, and it took several nights. I think I was under pretty strong sedation, but sometimes I'd wake up and see him standing over me." Meredith shuddered. "Some of the injections went in at the base of my skull, he wasn't lying about that, and some went into my arm. And he operated. I remember a scalpel, and other medical instruments." Matt was staring at her in horror.

Jasmine looked at Meredith apologetically. "I can keep running the same tests and see if there's something I missed. But I'm not sure how much I'm going to find." Her eyes shone with tears.

"I understand—" Meredith began, but Matt was already moving forward to wrap his arms around Jasmine.

"It's okay," he said, pressing Jasmine's head against his shoulder. "We won't give up."

Meredith stood back and watched them, feeling uncomfortably out of place as Matt lightly kissed the side of Jasmine's head. Their hearts were beating in time, she could hear them, a steady rhythm.

Was she ever going to be like that again? Would she and Alaric, whom she loved so much, ever be simple and wholly human together?

Probably not. Meredith swallowed hard, tasting bitterness. She wasn't going to let herself think that way. Jasmine and Bonnie. Science and magic. Maybe they could fix her, make her herself again.

She had to get out of there. Muttering a quick excuse, she swung out of the room, past their startled faces.

Keeping herself carefully to human speed, Meredith made her way toward the hospital exit. She could smell warm, fresh blood all around her, and her throat felt dry and tight. She walked a little faster.

Bursting out through the doors into the hospital parking lot, Meredith realized she was panting. The sun was shining brightly, and she squinted against the glare. She'd go to her car and go out to the woods and drink from a bird or a rabbit, she decided. She needed blood. Without it, she was weak and dizzy, and her emotions were swooping out of control. She felt like crying all the time.

At the far end of the parking lot, there was someone leaning against her car.

Jack.

Meredith slid her hand into her pocket and wrapped it around the cool wood of a stake, her heart pounding. If she could stake Jack, get him down long enough to snap his neck, maybe she could capture him.

Or maybe he was going to kill her first.

He had seen her, was watching her calmly. There was no point in running away, even if she wanted to. Meredith walked slowly across the parking lot toward him. She felt weirdly relaxed. Maybe she was going to die now. Did it matter? Really, she was already dead, wasn't she? In all the ways that counted.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Jack said when she got close enough. He held his hands out, loose and open, nonthreatening.

"Oh, yeah?" Meredith halted a few feet away from him. "Good to know."

"I worked far too hard on you to just waste it all." The corners of Jack's eyes crinkled as he gave his familiar affable grin. "Plus, I'm rather fond of you, despite your betrayal."

Something inside Meredith curdled, thick and sour. He was *fond* of her? Jack had *destroyed* her.

"So, let me make you a deal." Jack boosted himself up to sit on the hood of Meredith's car, perfectly relaxed. "Bring me Damon Salvatore and I'll forgive you. The whole thing, erased. You can come back to us, back where you belong. You know living with humans isn't working."

Meredith froze, glaring at him. Did Jack really think that, after everything, she *wanted* to be one of them?

Jack paused, looking at her with his bright, inquisitive brown eyes, and then shook his head. "Take the deal, Meredith," he said. "If you don't, I'll come after your friends. I always get what I want."

"Go to hell," Meredith snarled. She clutched the stake in her pocket and gauged the distance between them, her muscles tensing. He was so relaxed on the car's hood, not alert to danger. If she moved fast enough...

Jack smiled at her, his big, beautiful, warm smile. "Go to hell?" he echoed, his tone light. "This whole world is hell, Meredith, you should know that by now. The only choice is whether you're a demon or a victim."

His grin widened, and he leaned back on his hands, turning his face up to the sun. "You know which side you're on, don't you?"

Now. Yanking the stake from her pocket, Meredith lunged at him.

And, suddenly, Jack moved so fast that all she saw was a blur. Her hair lifted in the breeze as he passed.

He was gone.

Dear Diary,

I shouldn't be enjoying anything about this.

We're in serious trouble. Jack won't stop sending his vampires after us until either we kill him or he kills Damon. He's powerful and relentless, and I know how intelligent he is—he fooled us all.

When I close my eyes, sometimes I see Damon falling, a stake through his chest, and it feels so real. I can see the pain in the tight lines of Damon's body, the blood streaming from the wound. Agony rips through me—I'm losing something I thought was mine, that I thought was forever.

It feels just like when Stefan died.

Our search for Siobhan is the slenderest of leads. I should be panicking. Damon is in terrible danger.

And I should be grieving for Stefan just as hard as I was a month ago.

Nothing has changed. If anything, things have gotten worse.

And yet...

Elena glanced up from her journal toward the driver's seat.

Damon was driving, his long, strong fingers curled around the wheel, his dark eyes fixed on the horizon. *He was so beautiful*, Elena thought, examining the fine bones under his flawless pale skin, the soft curve of his mouth, the straight line of his nose. He glanced at her, and his lips curled into a brief smile before his eyes went back to the road. A pulse of affection went through the bond between them, and Elena wasn't sure whom it had come from.

Damon hums when he doesn't know I'm listening, she wrote, turning back to her journal. *Tunes I don't recognize, dances and holy music from the*

long centuries he lived in Europe, but other things, too: the ballet music Margaret dances to, old Beatles songs, pop from the radio.

Even though he technically died centuries ago, Damon's more alive than most people. I remember what Stefan said, back when he first told me their story.

After they rose and realized what they had become, Stefan ran, horrified, far beyond the city gates, preying on animals for fear of harming humans. Damon joined a band of mercenaries, fighting his way across Europe, drinking human blood amid the slaughter and confusion of battle.

Stefan made the noble choice. Damon was wicked, then. But Stefan held himself apart from humanity, caring too much to endanger them by coming close. Damon was right there in the thick of it, always, and it's kept him almost human, tangled up with our warm bodies and complicated, messy emotions.

I loved Stefan so much, with all my heart. I still love him. I'll never stop.

Damon is flawed and quick tempered and selfish. He's as likely to do the wrong thing as he is the right one.

Damon and I are more alike than Stefan and I ever were. I'm spoiled and headstrong, and I want everyone to fall in line with my plans. The worst things anyone ever said about me are sometimes true.

And despite everything—despite Jack, and poor Meredith, and everyone depending on the slimmest chance that we're following the right lead here—I'm having fun. It feels easy and natural, gliding along the roads together, hunting for Siobhan.

This isn't the first time we've traveled like this. When Stefan was missing, imprisoned in the Dark Dimension, we looked for him together. And it was fun then, too.

But then, Stefan was waiting for me. Now he's gone. We're going to avenge Stefan, not save him. It's too late for that.

Elena's breath hitched, and she tightened her jaw. She wasn't going to cry again, not now. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Damon glance toward her and then his hand, cool and reassuring, brushed her shoulder. Elena sniffed and looked back down at her journal.

Would it be so wrong? If Damon and I stopped fighting these feelings we've always had for each other?

I made up my mind. I chose Stefan, and I've never regretted it.

But now he's gone, and I'm going to live forever. Alone forever. I can't help panicking every time I think of it.

I could turn to Damon. I'm not going to lie to myself about that. I can have him, if I want him. If I stopped holding myself back, I could fall into his arms, and I know he'd catch me.

But I don't know if I can. For years, my feelings for Damon tainted what Stefan and I had. It hurt Stefan that I loved Damon, too.

Would turning to Damon now be my last, worst betrayal of Stefan?

Elena looked up again. Damon was humming to himself, softly. His eyes, fixed on the road, had a faraway look.

Something in her chest turned over, a tight, uncomfortable feeling. Elena realized that, for maybe the first time ever, she had no idea what she wanted.

* * *

"I'm sorry, my dear, I don't have any suggestions." Mrs. Flowers sipped at her tea, holding the delicate china cup carefully. "Vampires created by science are a little outside my area of expertise. All I can recommend is increasing your use of the protection spells you already know. Try to keep your friends safe."

Bonnie nodded. It had been a long shot, anyway, expecting her old friend to have a suggestion. But it just felt natural to come back to Fell's Church and ask Mrs. Flowers, who had taught her so much of her magic, for advice.

Since Bonnie had broken up with Zander, she'd thrown herself into trying to find a way to help Meredith and to protect them all from Jack and his minions. It had made her feel a little better, helped her to avoid thinking about how empty her apartment was, how empty her big bed was.

How empty her heart was.

Mrs. Flowers was looking older and frailer than the last time they had seen each other, Bonnie realized with a pang. Her hand, pale and thin and spotted with age, shook as she placed her cup back on the table. A little tea sloshed into the saucer.

"Now tell me, Bonnie," Mrs. Flowers said, fixing Bonnie with sharp blue eyes that were not in the least dimmed by age. "What else is bothering you?"

Bonnie fumbled for a reply. “Well, Meredith...”

“Not Meredith. Meredith’s problem is the same as the vampire problem. There’s something else.”

Bonnie heard herself give a funny, half-choked laugh. Mrs. Flowers had always been able to read Bonnie’s emotions.

“It’s Zander,” she said, as a hot tear ran down her cheek. “He’s left me.”

With that, the dam broke and she burst into sobs. By the time the frantic storm of tears stopped, Bonnie found herself sitting on the floor, her head in Mrs. Flowers’s lap as the old lady made soft tutting noises and stroked her hair. Mrs. Flowers’s dress smelled of lavender, and Bonnie couldn’t bring herself to care that she was probably staining it with tears and snot—it was amazingly comforting.

“Tell me everything,” Mrs. Flowers said, and Bonnie blurted out the whole story: Zander’s strange disconnectedness and the way Bonnie had finally confronted him about it; how he had proposed in the warm, fragrant rose garden and how Bonnie had said no, even though it broke her heart. That Zander was gone now, and that Bonnie ached with loneliness without him. That the few werewolves he had left behind to temporarily guard Dalcrest looked away, their faces stony, when they saw her now, and that Bonnie couldn’t blame them. Of course they hated her—she’d hurt their Alpha.

“But I had to,” Bonnie said, sitting back on her heels and wiping her eyes. “Didn’t I? I have to put my friends first right now. They *need* me.”

Mrs. Flowers sighed and sat very still for a moment, gazing off into the distance. Then she rose, resting one hand on the table as she shuffled toward the living room. “I want to show you something,” she said. “Wait here.”

After a moment, she returned, a framed picture in hand. Bonnie recognized it as one she’d seen before, sitting on the mantelpiece in the living room. A black-and-white photograph of a handsome young man in uniform. His dark hair was close cropped, and his eyes were pale, probably blue. His face was serious, but there was a natural curve at the corners of his mouth that suggested he had a sense of humor.

“He looks nice,” Bonnie said, scrubbing her hand against her face again. She felt exhausted and longed to just lie down on Mrs. Flowers’s floor and take a nice long nap. “Who is he?”

“William Flowers.” Mrs. Flowers gazed down at the picture, her smile soft and sad. “Bill.”

“Your husband?” Bonnie asked, peering at the picture with fresh interest.

Mrs. Flowers sighed again, a soft, almost soundless exhalation of breath, and shook her head. “Not quite, although I took his name,” she said. “He was my sweetheart. We grew up together and fell in love. It felt like it was meant to be. We laughed so much together, knew each other so well. Understood each other without having to try. I thought we’d go on like that forever.”

“So what happened?” Bonnie scrambled up off the floor, settling herself into the chair next to her mentor.

“We were engaged. And then he was drafted.” Mrs. Flowers passed a hand over her eyes. “I was so afraid of losing him. He wanted to get married before he went overseas, but I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t start our married life with him in danger. And then he was killed in action. I lost everything.”

Bonnie gasped. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Mrs. Flowers’s wise, calm face crumpled in well-remembered pain. “I spent years trying to contact him from beyond the veil. I wanted him to know how much I loved him. I tried everything: Séances, working with mediums, wandering the no man’s land between the living and the dead, inducing visions... nothing worked. Some people, when they die, pass out of our reach.”

“We couldn’t reach Stefan,” Bonnie said, feeling achingly sad.

“Come outside with me.” Mrs. Flowers rose stiffly and led the way out the kitchen door into her herb garden, moving more quickly than she had earlier.

It was warm and bright outside, and Bonnie automatically tipped her head back to feel the sun on her face. Mrs. Flowers led her through the winding paths of her herb garden. “Let’s see what you remember,” she said. “Tell me about this herb bed.”

“Oh. Um.” Bonnie scanned the plants. “Marjoram. For healing. And for cooking. Amaranth, also known as love-lies-bleeding. For healing and protection. Celandine, or swallow’s wort, for happiness.”

“Very good, I see you haven’t abandoned your training. And the bush next to them?”

The bush had long green leaves and cascading purple flowers, each made of a round spray of thin petals. “Pretty,” Bonnie said. “But I don’t know

what it is.”

Mrs. Flowers picked one of the blossoms and sniffed it. “Mimosa, my dear. It’s for joy rising from sorrow. Second chances.” Smiling, she passed the flower to Bonnie, and Bonnie automatically brought it up to her face and sniffed. It smelled clean and fresh. “Sometimes, Bonnie, true love is worth fighting for,” Mrs. Flowers said gently.

Bonnie held the flower carefully, but her heart felt as heavy as a stone. Mrs. Flowers had loved her Bill, and despite everything, had lost him anyway. Mimosa or not, it was hard to believe that joy could come from sorrow.



Matt shifted the two full bags of groceries he carried, balancing one against his hip as he dug his key to Jasmine's building out of his pocket.

A little thrill of satisfaction shot through him as he twisted the key in the lock. They'd only exchanged keys last week, and it felt really important, another sign that they were *all in*, really and truly committed to being part of each other's lives. Jasmine had kissed him hard, her lips firm and sure against his, after she pressed her keys into his palm, and it had been the best moment of a very tough week.

Jasmine had been stressing out. She'd run every test she could think of on Meredith's blood but was still coming up empty.

He clumped up the stairs, swinging the bags and thinking about how a nice dinner might help Jasmine feel better. *Stuffing the chicken with thyme, lemon, and garlic*, he thought, *would give it a nice flavor*. And wine might help her relax. Matt was humming as he reached the top of the stairs and turned toward Jasmine's apartment.

The door was hanging wide open.

Matt dropped his bags, hearing the wine bottle inside one of the bags smash, and ran toward it, his heart pounding. He barreled through the front door and stopped dead, horrified.

Jasmine's living room had been trashed. The velvety-soft sofa was flipped over and disemboweled. The weavings she'd put on the walls were ripped down, her tables knocked over and broken.

"Jasmine?" Matt called, breaking out of his shock. He raced down the hall, checking the other rooms.

The kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom were more of the same, everything smashed and broken. The closet door had been ripped off, clothes trailing out as if someone had tried to hold onto them while being yanked out of the closet. "*Jasmine!*"

His phone rang. JASMINE, the display read. *Thank God*. She was okay. She would have some explanation. Tension flowed out of him, his shoulders relaxing.

“Where are you?” Matt answered the phone. “Are you okay?”

A low, warm, familiar chuckle. Not Jasmine’s. Everything went fuzzy around the edges, and Matt swayed on his feet, lightheaded. *Jack*.

“I’m fine,” Jack said. “Your girlfriend seems a little nervous, though.”

“You—” Matt clenched his teeth, snapping things back into focus. “I’ll kill you if you hurt her,” he spat.

Jack laughed again. “You can’t, can you?” he asked. “You know, I didn’t really get to know Jasmine back when you and I were hanging around together. I can see why you like her. She’s pretty tasty, isn’t she?” He moved the phone, and Matt heard a soft whimper.

“Jasmine?” he said, straining to hear. “Honey, be strong. It’ll be all right.” His pulse was pounding, his hands sweating. He couldn’t *think*.

“She’s fine,” Jack said. “For now.”

“Please don’t hurt her,” Matt said. “I’ll do anything you want.” He felt sick and dizzy. Not Jasmine, he prayed, not good, strong Jasmine, who’d been outside all of this, safe—until Matt brought her in.

“I want Damon,” Jack said, his voice suddenly cold and tight. “Bring me Damon, and I’ll let your girlfriend go.”

[#TVD12SaveJasmine](#)



“She’s got to be somewhere. Siobhan can’t have gotten away from us.” Elena had her hands balled into fists, pressed against her temples. She was concentrating hard, her pretty face twisted. “If I could just find her...”

“Calm down,” Damon told her as he steered the car down the highway, still heading north. It seemed as good a direction as any, although Elena had lost Siobhan’s trail earlier that day. “We’ll pull into the next motel we see. You need a good night’s rest. It’ll come back to you.”

The sun was setting, throwing long shadows across the road. If Elena ate and rested, maybe she’d be able to find her Power again.

He was having trouble, too. Anxiety radiated through their bond, making him jittery. Elena was in pain, her head aching, her muscles tense, and that made Damon hurt, too. He longed to pull her against him and stroke her soft golden hair, to press her face against his shoulder and hold her until she calmed.

“We can’t stop,” Elena said firmly. “There’s no time.” She leaned back against the window and shut her eyes, making little huffing noises as she drew in breaths through her nose, then let them out through her mouth.

Damon knew she was trying to force her Guardian Powers to the surface. They were strong, but fickle, these Powers. Even when she was working on a Guardian task, like now, she couldn’t always rely on them.

Ridiculous Celestial Guardians. They wielded huge Powers themselves, more than any vampire or witch, but they meted out tiny bits of Power to the Earthly Guardians like drips from a faucet. Damon had to wonder: Did the Celestial Guardians want to keep Earthly Guardians like Elena weak and dependent on them? Or were their own Powers on Earth limited?

In any case, it made no difference now. The important thing was Elena.

“Listen,” he said, and reached out to stroke her arm, gently reassuring her. “You’re strong as hell, princess. The strongest person I’ve ever met. You’ll do this stubborn and bull-headed, just like you’ve done everything else the whole time I’ve known you.”

He gave her his most blinding grin, and something softened in Elena's eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment, her gaze so deeply blue, as blue as the lapis lazuli that let Damon walk in sunlight.

Something in his chest tightened, and he felt it tug toward Elena, as sure as a magnet. They were breathing in time, he realized, their chests rising and falling in perfect accord. He couldn't resist her anymore.

He didn't want to resist. Elena was all he wanted, all he needed. She had been since the first time he saw her, a pretty high school girl in the morning sunshine, all pink and gold and flushed with the warmth of life. Since the first time his mind brushed hers, and he realized she was more than that: strong and fierce, stubborn and proud. Perfect for him.

Slowly, giving her time to pull away, Damon slid closer. Elena didn't back away, but held his gaze, her blue eyes almost challenging. She *wanted* this; he could feel that want burning through their bond. Gently, holding his breath, he pressed his lips to hers.

Her lips were impossibly soft and warm, the softest thing he'd ever felt. Damon's eyes closed and he leaned closer, cupping her cheek with one hand. The connection between them throbbed with hot energy, with desire. His fingers tangled in her silky hair, and he pulled her closer still.

He could feel their auras blending. It was as if they were melting into each other. He could almost see them, the way Elena had described their auras to him, his peacock blue and rust-red, hers a soft gold. They were entwining—he could feel it. They were stronger like this, better together.

Damon thought briefly of his brother, then pushed the thought away. Stefan was *gone*. And Damon and Elena remained. He stroked Elena's cheek, ran his hand over her shoulders, down her arm. She was *his*, he knew it as surely as he'd ever known anything. They belonged to each other.

And then, a sharp, hard jerk. All over, he felt exposed, strained. Something *pulled* at him, a brisk, insistent tug.

With a muffled gasp against Elena's mouth, Damon realized she was drawing his aura into hers, his peacock blue slowly shading to gold. Her aura was growing bigger, brighter.

It hurt, a little, but it was somehow thrilling. The steady, draining pull made him lightheaded, made him sigh against her lips. Was this how it felt for her when he'd fed on her?

Just as when he'd fed on her, this was *love*, he was sure of it.

Damon tangled both hands in Elena's hair, silken strands between his fingers, and tried to push his aura toward her, to give her whatever she needed.

Elena pulled away slowly and Damon sat back, drained and relaxed. His head was swimming. They stared at each other, and Elena licked her lips quickly, just a brief slide of her tongue.

"West," she said.

"What?" Damon asked. His heart was pounding, slow and heavy, and it was an effort to speak.

"I see it now," Elena said. "She went west."

Shaking himself back into alertness, Damon started the engine. "We can turn west on I-64," he said, his mouth dry. "About half a mile."

"Good," Elena said. She was looking straight ahead through the windshield. Damon checked the connection between them, but Elena was locked down tight. All he got was an intent concentration on the road ahead. Whatever else she was thinking, she wasn't letting herself feel it, not yet. She wasn't going to let him in.

Tentatively, he reached across the seat between them, his hand palm up, waiting for her hand to clasp his.

Elena did not take his hand.



Matt wiped his sweaty palms against his jeans and let his head rest against the driver's seat for a moment. He took a deep breath before looking at the polished wooden stave in the passenger seat—one of Meredith's old bo staffs. He gritted his teeth and picked it up. It was cool and sturdy in his hands, and he gripped it tightly, trying to remember all the moves Meredith had ever taught him.

Then he climbed out of the car, dread pooling in his stomach. Waiting wasn't going to make this any easier.

Gravel scattered under his feet as he made his way across the parking lot toward Jack's warehouse. Everything was silent, no signs of life in the empty lot. The silence seemed *wrong*, and, after a moment, Matt realized how weirdly complete it was: no sounds of traffic from the highway, no rustling of leaves from the trees, no birdsong. He shuddered, but kept walking.

Matt couldn't wait for the others to make a plan, couldn't wait for Elena and Damon to come home. Not while Jasmine was suffering.

Sweet, intelligent Jasmine with her shining eyes and softly curving mouth. Jasmine who loved him, who trusted him. Who had thrown herself wholeheartedly into trying to help Matt and his friends. Whatever happened, he had to at least *try* to save her. Tears prickled at the back of Matt's eyes, and he blinked them away.

He wasn't an idiot. There was a nest of vampires inside this warehouse. With his total lack of special powers, he was probably going to his death.

Matt swallowed hard. It would be better to die today trying to save Jasmine than to live sixty more years knowing he'd abandoned her.

Clutching the stave tightly, he considered his silent surroundings. The whole place seemed still and empty, as if it were deserted, but Matt knew better. He inspected the door. There was a little rust on its panels, but it was solid looking and made of steel. There was no way he'd be able to kick it down.

With a mental shrug, Matt raised his fist and pounded heavily on the

door, which let out metallic echoing thuds. They were vampires, they would have heard him coming.

The door gave a long screech as a lanky dark-haired guy with close-set eyes—not a guy, a *vampire*—opened it. Acting on instinct, Matt moved fast.

One hard thrust from the stave in Matt's hand, and the vampire staggered and fell, blood blooming red across his chest, his mouth open in a grimace of surprise. His eyes dimmed. He was dead, at least for the moment. *Lucky hit.* Matt knew with deadly certainty that his luck wasn't going to last.

Matt stepped over the dead vampire and moved toward the next one, a slim blond girl with a short swinging bob.

She was just standing still, looking bewildered, as if events were happening too quickly for her to catch up. Beyond her, chained to the back wall of the warehouse, he glimpsed Jasmine and quickly looked away, his breath catching.

He couldn't concentrate on the fight if he looked at her right now. He wouldn't have much time before the vampires got over their surprise and their superior reflexes kicked in.

But maybe he could get past one more, maybe he could make his way to Jasmine. *Please*, he prayed silently, raising his stave again. *Please. If I'm going to die, at least let me touch Jasmine again.*

But as he moved toward the girl, a pair of strong arms, as unyielding as steel bands, wrapped around him from behind and pinned Matt's arms to his sides.

He tried to struggle, but it was pointless; however much he strained, he couldn't move at all. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the tall, thin vampire struggling to his feet, already beginning to recover. Giving in to despair, Matt sagged against his captor's arms.

"Can you think of a reason I shouldn't kill you right now?" Jack's voice said, soft and low. His breath was warm against Matt's ear, and Matt shuddered.

Jack squeezed him tighter, and Matt struggled to breathe. It was painful, the pressure of Jack's arms compressing his ribs, slowly pressing the air from his lungs. Now that the fight was over, and he'd failed, just as he'd feared he would, he let himself look across the warehouse toward Jasmine for the first time.

Her arms were chained high above her head, her muscles taut with the strain, and she was looking straight back at him, her eyes shining with love. Tears ran down her cheeks, making long tracks through the dirt there. There were streaks of dried blood on the side of her throat. She gave Matt a tiny, tremulous smile, and his chest ached. He hadn't saved her, and now she was trying to send him comfort.

"Take me instead," Matt blurted out.

"What?" Jack sounded startled, and his arms loosened a fraction. Matt gasped in a quick breath.

"I'm better for your purposes than Jasmine is," he said hurriedly. This was his only back-up plan, Jasmine's *only* chance. He had to sell it. "I'm a better hostage. Elena and the others have known me longer, they're more likely to trade Damon for me. You hunted with us. You know what I'm saying is true."

Jack made a thoughtful humming noise in his throat, considering, and Matt clenched his teeth. This was the only way he could possibly save Jasmine, he realized, by throwing himself into the abyss. They were all watching him, five or six vampires, their eyes hostile. Everything was sharp and bright at the edges, and he wondered if he was going into shock.

Then Jack huffed, a short, amused sound. "Who says chivalry is dead?"

Fast enough so that the world blurred around him, Matt felt himself lifted and rushed across the warehouse. Jack slammed him back against the wall so hard that Matt was knocked breathless once more.

"Now, tell me why I shouldn't keep you both?" Jack asked.

Matt felt sick. Jack wouldn't really keep them both, would he? He gulped quickly, nervously. He had to *think*. "Jasmine has to tell the others what happened," he said. "You won't get Damon if they don't need to trade for me. And you won't get Damon if they think you can't be trusted to trade me back. If you let her go, it'll be a show of good faith."

Jack pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Good point. Sadie, get over here and unlock the cuffs."

The blond girl hurried over and took the cuffs off Jasmine's wrists, pulling her away from the wall. Jasmine was shaking, hard, and she reached out for Matt, her hands trembling. "Please..." she said, her voice strained. "Let me talk to him."

Jack shoved Matt roughly into the place where Jasmine had been and began to lock the cuffs around his wrists, yanking his arms up with a vicious twist that made his shoulders burn. Matt grunted with pain. “Better get out while you can, sweetheart,” Jack said, indifferently, and pushed her away. “Sadie, take her home.”

As Sadie began to pull her away, Matt took one last look at Jasmine. Her beautiful liquid brown eyes were full of tears. Trying to fill his own gaze with all of his love and all the confidence he didn’t feel, Matt told her, “It’s all right. I’ll see you soon.”

Jasmine’s fingers brushed over his arm, featherlight, as Sadie pulled her away. At least they had touched one last time.

[#TVD12Captive](#)



“This is it,” Elena said, her mouth dry and her hands twitching with anticipation. Siobhan’s trail had led them westward, high into the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. And now, here they were, staring at a small cave entrance.

Elena bent to look more closely. A long cavern stretched further than she could see. They’d have to crawl to get through it. Elena cringed at the thought of moving into the damp and darkness, the heavy stone pressing down all around them.

But they didn’t have a choice. Siobhan’s bloodred aura, the color of death and violence, led straight into the cave. Despite her reluctance to crawl into the dark, Elena’s Guardian Powers were straining inside her, urging her forward. There was someone evil here, someone she was duty-bound to destroy.

No. Elena closed her eyes for a second and willed herself calm. She had to remember that they weren’t planning to kill Siobhan, not yet. Not until they had found out what she knew about Jack.

“I’ll go first,” Damon said. Elena opened her mouth to argue, and he raised an eyebrow at her challengingly.

Just then Elena’s phone rang. *Jasmine*, the display told her. Elena frowned. Jasmine never called her. Still, maybe it was good news about her research on Meredith’s blood.

“Hello?” she said, picking up. Immediately, she tensed.

Jasmine was crying, harsh sobs coming through the phone. Not good news, after all. “Jasmine? What is it? What’s happened?” Beside Elena, Damon stiffened.

“Jack has Matt,” Jasmine said, her voice rough and panicked. “He wants to trade him for Damon. He—it’s horrible, Elena, they’re *feeding* on him, and he’s only there because of me.”

For a moment, Elena froze. Not Matt. He was brave and strong, but he

didn't have special Power or protection, not like she did. Not like Damon did, or Bonnie, or Meredith.

Not like Stefan had, and Elena's stomach knotted as the picture of Stefan falling, his expression of shock fading into blankness, flashed through her mind again. There was no way Matt could survive Jack, not if Stefan hadn't.

Damon took the phone out of her hand. He'd heard everything, of course. "We'll get your boyfriend back," he said soothingly into the phone. "Once we take care of business here, find out the best way to handle Jack, we'll be right there." He paused to listen to Jasmine's reply, but Elena couldn't hear what she said. "They won't kill him," he said after a moment, his eyes meeting Elena's. "Not if Jack wants to trade him for me."

After he hung up, Damon looked at Elena again, his dark eyes unreadable. He'd been looking at her like that a lot, ever since they'd kissed a few hours ago. Unthinkingly, Elena touched her lips and felt herself flush as Damon's gaze lingered on her fingers.

"We'd better get moving," he said abruptly. "It appears that your friends can't keep themselves out of trouble for even a couple of days without us." Crouching down, he contemplated the cave entrance for a moment.

Something about the high defensive line of Damon's shoulders, the pale skin at the nape of his neck made Elena say, impulsively, "We wouldn't trade you, Damon. Not even for Matt."

Damon looked back over his shoulder at her and flashed a brief, brilliant smile. "Good to know." Ducking his head, he crawled through the mouth of the cavern. Pulling out the flashlight she carried, Elena followed.

The stone was cold and rough against her hands and knees, and it was difficult to hold on to the flashlight, which showed her little more than Damon's heels. He could see in the dark as well as a cat, Elena knew, but her own view was restricted to the small pool of light thrown by her flashlight, and the red strands of Siobhan's aura, strands as thick as Elena's wrist, leading her steadily on.

Just as Elena began to feel that she couldn't take the sensation of the stone walls pressing in on her from every direction, the tunnel opened up into a wider cavern. She straightened up with relief, her back and legs aching from the long crawl.

Siobhan wasn't in this part of the cave, either, she realized immediately.

The bloodred trail of her aura led further on, disappearing through another opening in the rock wall. Elena stood shoulder to shoulder with Damon, scanning the cavern with her flashlight.

The stone walls were rough and dark, glittering in places with mica, maybe, or fool's gold. It was damp and cold—they must have come a good way underground.

"I smell blood," Damon said, very quietly. "Human blood. Which way does the trail lead?" Elena pointed, and he nodded grimly.

Walking softly, their arms brushing, they followed the bloodred aura. Something was pushing eagerly inside Elena—*find her, finish her, eliminate her*—but she concentrated on keeping her Powers under control. *Don't attack unless you have to*, she told herself. The Guardians wanted Siobhan dead, but Elena needed her alive.

They stepped through an opening in the rock wall, and Elena instinctively flinched backward, grabbing hold of Damon's arm to steady herself.

Corpses were littered carelessly across the smooth stone floor, tumbled on top of each other like dolls dropped by a bored child, ten or twelve of them, all dead. Closest to Elena's feet, an elderly woman stared up through empty eyes, her throat torn out.

Surrounded by the bodies stood a tall figure in a long, bloodstained white dress. Black hair flowed around her, twining over her shoulders and down to her waist. Siobhan. In her arms, half-wrapped in Siobhan's hair, was another victim, Siobhan's teeth working busily at his throat. Her eyes were closed.

Kill her. Elena started forward, all her strategies forgotten in the need to stop Siobhan, to protect her victim. *Dangerous. Evil.* Her Guardian Power bubbled up in her chest, ready to attack. Damon's hand gripped her shoulder, trying to hold her back.

But they were too late. As soon as Elena moved, Siobhan's eyes shot open, vividly blue, even in the shadowy light of the flashlight. She dropped the man she'd been feeding on, and he landed with a thud on the stone floor of the cave. He was clearly dead.

The heat in Elena's chest dissipated, leaving an empty ache. There was no one to save here.

Siobhan's eyes, gleaming with wicked joy, fixed on Elena. Her lips were

red and slick with blood. "You..." she said, her voice a hoarse whisper. "I dreamed of you." Her gaze flickered to Damon. "And a little vampire, too."

Elena felt Damon stiffen, and she shushed him with a touch on his arm. "We've been looking for you, Siobhan," she said politely. "We came to ask for your help."

Moving faster than Elena could track, Siobhan was suddenly terribly close. Elena struggled for breath, realizing only after a moment that Siobhan's hand was tight around her throat. She was so *fast*.

Damon snarled, and Elena sent him a warning through their bond: *Wait*. Siobhan wasn't hurting Elena. Not yet, anyway. And they needed her to listen to them.

Now that she was holding Elena, Siobhan was curiously still. Her eyes searched Elena's. "You're very..." she said, sounding puzzled and distant, like a sleepwalker. She looked Elena up and down. "... shiny. Gold. Not quite human. I don't know what you are."

Elena concentrated on breathing, slow and shallow. She needed to stay calm. Siobhan's fingers were strong on her throat, and up close, the old vampire smelled like fresh blood, like death.

She can't kill you, Elena told herself firmly, and kept her eyes steady on Siobhan's. Her Guardian instincts squirmed inside her: *kill her, kill her now*, and Elena firmly restrained herself. She wouldn't kill Siobhan, not yet. Not while she might be of use to them.

"Jack Daltry," Damon said, watching them closely. "He's killing vampires, like you and me. We want to kill him first. Can you help us?"

Siobhan grinned savagely, and Elena recoiled. The vampire's canines were fully extended, stained with blood. Smiling, any illusion of humanity ripped away from her face. She looked like a monster. "That's not even his name," she said. "What chance do you have, knowing nothing? *Idiots*."

"Henrik Goetsch, then," Damon said, and Siobhan's eyes widened slightly. She hadn't expected them to know Jack's real name.

"Henrik Goetsch," she said thoughtfully, rolling the name over her tongue as if she was tasting it. "Yes, I remember Henrik." Abruptly, she let go of Elena's throat and strode away, her bare foot stepping on a corpse's hand as nonchalantly as if it had been a twig. The edge of her long gown dragged through a pool of blood.

Elena sucked in a deep draught of air, her hand on her throat. “What do you remember about him?” she asked, keeping her voice steady.

Siobhan swung around to face them. For a moment, she looked stricken, her eyes huge and unhappy, and then she laughed harshly. “He’s not a nice man, little sunshine,” she said.

“What did he do?” Elena asked softly. She smiled hesitantly at Siobhan—you *can tell me, we’re just two girls*—and the vampire’s eyes narrowed.

“Trapped me,” she said bitterly. “Tricked me. Pretended to love me. He took so much blood, and he wouldn’t let me feed.” Her lips curled into a smile. “I got loose, though, and killed his lab assistant. He wasn’t expecting *that*.” She licked her lips, reminiscing, and then scowled. “She tasted horrible, though. All wrong. Killed Henrik’s girlfriend, too.”

Satisfaction began to uncurl inside Elena, and she could feel the same emotion coming from Damon through their bond. They had been right. Siobhan was the vampire Jack had used to make his artificial vampires.

“Don’t you want revenge?” Damon asked, stepping toward Siobhan, his hands held out as if he was coaxing a skittish animal. “Don’t you want to kill Henrik? *Can* he be killed?”

“Oh, I’ll kill him one of these days,” Siobhan said, idly wandering among her corpses. She toed a middle-aged man over with her bare foot, so that he flopped onto his back, staring with empty eyes at the roof of the cave. Siobhan smiled down at him, as if she was laughing at a private joke. “I leave these bodies where I know he’s been. To remind him I know his secret, and that I’m coming for him.”

“His secret?” Elena said breathlessly. “So he *can* be killed.”

Siobhan looked coyly at them through her lashes and mimed zipping her lips. One of the smudges of blood on her face was definitely a handprint, Elena realized, feeling a little sick.

Siobhan cocked her head to one side, considering. “I knew Henrik would leave himself a back door. He wouldn’t create an army he couldn’t get rid of,” she said slowly. “So I watched and waited—I was very clever about it—and eventually I found out there was a poison that would kill the vampires he’d made. And I stole it.”

“It’ll kill Henrik, too?” Damon asked swiftly.

“Of course,” Siobhan said. “He’s just like the rest of them.” She

wandered closer to them, her blue eyes fixed on Elena. With a thrill of disgust, Elena realized she was eyeing the vein on the side of Elena's throat. "I'm not convinced I should let you have it, though. I don't *want* anyone else getting my revenge. Maybe I should kill you instead. Eliminate the competition."

An instinctual fear clenched Elena's muscles. *She can't kill you. But she could hurt you trying.* This old, wicked vampire had dragged so many victims deep underground and killed them all, just to prove a point. She was strong and determined.

"Please," Elena said softly. She felt oddly as if she was rolling over to show her own underbelly, appeasing the vicious old vampire. "We need to kill Jack *now*. We want the same thing you do." Her Guardian instincts were chanting *kill her kill her now*, but Elena swallowed them back and smiled at the vampire.

The edges of Siobhan's lips curled up in a smile, and her eyes gleamed with triumph. "Take me with you."

Damon shot Elena a look. His distrust of Siobhan came clearly through their bond.

Elena hesitated, and Siobhan's smile widened. "Take me with you," she said again. "The only way you're getting the poison is if I can watch Henrik die."

Damon was right; they couldn't trust her. But they didn't have a choice, not if they wanted Siobhan's secret. She swallowed hard and said, as evenly as she could, "Okay. Let's go."

As they headed for the exit, Damon's eyes met Elena's. She could feel the same apprehension bubbling through them both. Siobhan was clearly vicious and unstable. What kind of ally would she be?

For now, they needed her. But as soon as Jack was dead, Elena promised inwardly, soothing her restless Guardian Power, she would kill Siobhan herself.

[#TVD12DealwiththeDevil](#)

The drive back had been far too long, Damon thought, even though they'd taken a straight route home instead of the wandering path that had led them to the caverns. In the back seat, Siobhan had grumbled constantly, complaining about the movement of the car, the confined space, the smells of gasoline and oil.

For his part, Damon had hardly been able to stand the smell of drying blood from her face and clothing. It made his teeth ache with hunger.

"It's almost daylight," she said now, as Damon took the side road that would lead them to Jack's warehouse lair. "If the sun reaches inside this car, I'll be sure to bring you both down with me." Her tilted pale eyes were commanding, staring at his reflection in the rearview mirror.

"We'll be in before dawn, and the warehouse doesn't have any windows," he told her reassuringly. "We can cover you with something to get you out after Jack's dead."

That would be a good way to kill her, he mused. A quick shove into the sunlight, a protecting blanket ripped away, and they'd be free of Siobhan before she could turn on them. He glanced at Elena, wondering if she'd caught the image through their bond.

But Elena was leaning forward, peering through the windshield at the warehouse. "Good, they're already here."

The others were waiting in a parking lot across the highway from Jack's warehouse, far enough away that Jack's vampires wouldn't be able to hear them coming. Meredith, tall and poised, stood half-concealed in the shadows, her eyes shining in the reflected glare of their headlights. As the car turned into the lot, she raised a hand in greeting. Beside her was Alaric, his hands crammed into his pockets. A little behind them, Damon glimpsed two curly heads. Bonnie and Jasmine.

No Zander, no Pack. His little redbird had seemed strained the last time he saw her; there must be trouble in paradise. It was a pity. They could have used the wolves.

Damon dismissed the thought. They'd work with what they had. He parked the car, and he and Elena crossed the parking lot to their friends, Siobhan stalking behind them. There was a cold feeling on the back of Damon's neck. He didn't like not being able to see Siobhan's every move.

"What a lot of humans," Siobhan said. "Will we feed before we kill Jack?"

"No," Damon said firmly, and the older vampire gave an exaggerated sigh of disappointment.

"Jack's in there," Meredith said, as soon as they got close, jerking her head toward the warehouse on the other side of the highway.

"Oh, she's one of Henrik's nasty creations," Siobhan said, sounding disgusted. "She's not even real." Meredith's hand clenched on her stave.

Damon shook his head, and Meredith loosened her grip. She looked pale and drawn, which answered one question he'd had. She hadn't been drinking human blood, not since she came back from Jack's group. He hadn't had anything but animal blood either, not since he'd fed from Elena. Neither of them were going to be at their best for this fight.

Still, they just had to overpower Jack long enough to inject him with the poison. And to rescue Matt, Damon supposed.

"Give me the poison," he said, holding his hand out to Siobhan. She cocked her eyebrow at him. "Please." She hesitated for a moment and then reached into her pocket and drew out a vial of dark liquid. She'd had it hidden somewhere at the back of the cave among her corpses. She hadn't let them see exactly where.

Damon waited. Siobhan turned the vial over in her hands, watching the liquid flow back and forth. Her eyes were hooded and thoughtful.

She's not going to hand it over. Damon sighed inwardly, preparing himself for the fight. Siobhan, freshly full of human blood, would be stronger than he was, but at least she was outnumbered.

"I don't know," Siobhan said slowly. "I've been waiting a long time to kill Henrik. And it was very clever of me to find the poison. This is *mine*."

"Please," Elena said. "Siobhan, you've been following him for so long. It must be a burden. Let us help you."

The two pairs of blue eyes met squarely, and Damon was reminded of generals on a battlefield. They weren't friends, would never be friends, but

they had a common cause.

Siobhan broke their exchanged gaze first. With a scornful curl of her lip, she gave Damon the vial, her fingers cool as they brushed against his.

He looked at Jasmine. “Did you bring a syringe?” Jasmine nodded and bent her head to look through the medical bag she carried.

Damon prepared the syringe and tucked it carefully into his shirt pocket before turning to the others. “Ready?”

Everyone nodded. The humans each gripped a stake, while Meredith stood beside Damon. Her lips curled back in a snarl, showing her canines, already sharp and long.

“Breaking their necks will keep them down longest,” Damon told them, “but that’s tough for a human to manage. Strike hard and keep moving.” He shot Elena a small smile. *She* would be fine, he reminded himself. Nothing supernatural could kill her.

“Damon and I will go after Jack,” she said. “Everyone else needs to focus on Matt. Jasmine, you know where he is?”

Jasmine nodded, her eyes huge. “They have him chained up against the back wall.”

“I can break the chains,” Meredith said quickly. “Just be careful everybody, okay?”

Bonnie and Alaric linked their free hands, beginning to murmur a protective charm. Damon glanced at them all, the brave little group of humans—plus Meredith—he’d somehow gotten himself entangled with, and felt oddly fond. He could count on them to fight, to protect each other until their last breaths. Behind them, Siobhan stood statue still, her pale face blank, the splotches of blood on her dress dry now.

“Are you with us?” Damon demanded.

She stared at him. “I’m coming,” she said in her throaty, expressionless voice.

“Let’s go, then,” Damon said, and they crossed the highway.

Jack’s vampires depended too much on their deadbolts and their sharp hearing to protect them, Damon thought with disgust. When he picked the lock and swung the door quietly open, they caught the guards on duty by surprise. They were a young couple, still almost human, who’d been wrapped up in each other instead of watching for intruders.

Damon had the impression of a bewildered, young face as he snapped the neck of the guy. When he turned to take care of the girl, Meredith already had her down on the floor.

“Good work,” Damon muttered, and Meredith rolled her eyes.

“Come on,” she said softly, and Jasmine, Bonnie, and Alaric followed her farther into the warehouse. There were crates piled everywhere, and they were soon out of sight, although Damon could hear their footsteps. He frowned. If he could hear them, so could any other vampire.

Elena stood beside him, poised with a stake ready in her hand. A little behind her, Siobhan, cold-eyed and expressionless, walked across the girl vampire’s body, a rib snapping audibly beneath her feet. Damon repressed a shudder. He didn’t like her so close behind Elena, looming like an angel of death.

Turning his attention, Damon scanned the warehouse for Jack, keeping his eyes and ears open. “Over there,” he murmured, jerking his chin toward a stack of crates. There was someone behind them.

He cocked an eyebrow at Elena, and she nodded.

A grunt came from the other side of the warehouse, and he glanced over just in time to see another vampire fall, Alaric’s stake in his chest. They needed to find Jack, kill him, and get out, before his minions started recovering and they lost their advantage.

Senses on alert, Damon rounded the crates. Through his shirt pocket, he could feel the hypodermic needle.

A warm body slammed into his, kicking and punching, and he raised a hand to protect the syringe. His left hand cupping his pocket, he spun and kicked his attacker away. It was only another of Jack’s vampires, a round-faced blonde. Damon snapped his neck with his free hand without pausing.

“Use your teeth, idiot,” he muttered. He didn’t know how Jack chose his minions, but it wasn’t for their brains. Or, Meredith excepted, their fighting skill.

A voice came from behind him. “I’ve been looking forward to this.”

Damon turned. Jack was lightly poised on the balls of his feet, his eyes tracking Damon’s every move. He wasn’t underestimating Damon as an opponent, not anymore.

With a burst of energy, Damon charged, canines extended. He slammed

into Jack, and they both fell heavily to the floor.

Sinking his teeth into Jack's throat, Damon grappled with him, trying to keep him down as the strange taste of Jack's blood filled his mouth. Damon grimaced in disgust, but kept biting, working his teeth back and forth in Jack's throat to reopen the wound before it had time to heal. Jack grunted in pain and thrashed beneath Damon's weight, but Damon had him pinned.

The chemical-laden blood was flooding into his mouth, and Damon swallowed rapidly, gulping it down despite the taste. Blood would make him stronger, and he desperately needed that if he was going to defeat Jack. Damon felt almost lightheaded with it, fireworks bursting behind his eyes.

Damon drew back to get his hands on the syringe, pulling his canines from Jack's neck. Jack twisted and thrashed, bucking up and finally throwing Damon off. Damon rolled backward, crashing into the crate behind him.

Jack leaped to his feet in one smooth, controlled motion, his face twisted with rage. Then he froze, looking past Damon. "Siobhan?" he asked. There was a note of fear in his voice, the first Damon had ever heard from him.

"Hello, Jack." Siobhan's voice came from behind, cool and mocking, but Damon didn't turn to look at her. This was his chance.

He pulled the syringe from his pocket. The liquid inside shimmered dark blue in the light of the warehouse. He began to inch toward Jack.

Jack suddenly gave a cut-off shout as his body flew backward like a rag doll's and slammed into the warehouse wall. Suspended there, his feet dangled above the floor. His hands were pressed backward, flat against the wall. He was straining, the tendons in his neck visibly taut. He couldn't move.

For a moment, Damon was stunned into stillness himself. Then he felt Elena's concentration, her triumph coming through the bond. *Being near Siobhan must have woken up her Powers.* Damon glanced at Elena. Her hands were up, palms out, as if she was holding Jack in place, and her eyes were bright with intensity.

"Give it to me. I want to do it," Elena muttered, and Damon snapped back into action.

He took two steps toward her and slapped the syringe into her palm. Let Elena have this kill. If finishing Jack would give her some peace, help her find solace for Stefan's murder, then Damon would gladly give it to her.

Still holding Jack in place, Elena stepped forward and jammed the

needle into Jack's neck. As she pushed the plunger on the hypodermic, she smiled, a sharp, angry smile—no joy in it, but a great deal of satisfaction. From behind them, Siobhan began to laugh.

Jack blinked. And then he began to struggle, his head banging back against the wall and his arms coming up to grasp at Elena. Her hold on him must be slipping.

Damon ran forward and tackled him away, ripping his hands off of Elena. They fell to the ground together and rolled, Jack tearing at Damon with hands and teeth. He was as strong as ever.

It hadn't worked, Damon realized, filling with heavy dread, as he felt blood run down his side. *It hadn't worked.* Damon slammed Jack's head against the concrete floor and snarled with rage and frustration.

Damon gasped and lost his focus on Jack, who kicked him away. A stake drove through his ribs from behind. They hadn't hit the heart, though, he realized dazedly, or he'd already be dead. He tried to sit up as he heard Jack get to his feet, his footsteps quickly moving away.

Siobhan stood over Damon, her bloodred lips curled in a smile. "I wouldn't give you a real poison, you fool," she said coldly. "I *love* him. No one will kill him but me."

From behind her came a growl of fury. Siobhan gasped, her face distorting with pain, and arched backward, her blue eyes wide and startled. Fresh red blood spread across the front of her stained white nightgown. Pulling the stake from his own back, Damon realized the tip of another stake was protruding from Siobhan's chest.

This one, though, hadn't missed the heart. Siobhan, her eyes suddenly blank, fell, her black hair spreading out around her. Behind her, with the face of an avenging angel, stood Elena.

Climbing to his feet, Damon caught Elena and pulled her against him. Her heart was beating hard, he could feel it pounding against him.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Elena shook her head. "No," she said, sounding dazed. "Are you all right? She *staked* you."

Jack was nowhere to be seen—he must have escaped when Siobhan staked Damon. But Damon managed to arrange his face into a smile. "It takes more than a stake to take me down, princess." His back was aching horribly,

and he could feel blood running down between his shoulder blades, soaking his shirt.

Scuffling footsteps came from behind them, and Damon wheeled around to see the others coming back, supporting Matt, who leaned heavily on Alaric. Jasmine was trying to check his vitals as she hurried beside them.

“The vampires are starting to wake up,” Meredith said sharply. “We have to go. Did the poison work?”

Damon held Elena closer. “No.” He could feel her shock and despair resonating through the bond, echoing his own. This had been their only chance. Siobhan had lied—and they had lost their chance to take vengeance for Stefan.

Jack was gone. They were no closer to finding a way to kill him, and their one lead had turned out to be worse than useless.

They had failed.



Bonnie clutched Matt's hand, trying to hold him steady as Jasmine steered the car around a curve. Fresh blood was staining the bandage on his neck, and Bonnie's stomach turned over. His neck had looked like a piece of raw meat.

"He's bleeding again," she told Jasmine, her voice thin.

Jasmine's eyes flicked up to the rear view mirror. "Put pressure on it. We're almost there."

Bonnie took a cloth from the seat beside her and pushed it firmly against Matt's neck. He gave a small pained grunt, a crease appearing between his eyebrows. "Sorry, so sorry. Is this right?"

"You're doing great," Jasmine told her.

Matt shifted, blinking his eyes open. "M'okay," he muttered.

"Sure you are, cowboy," Jasmine told him. "Just take it easy." At the sound of her voice, Matt's face relaxed, and his eyes fluttered shut again.

Jasmine pulled the car into a spot near the front door of Elena and Damon's apartment building, and Meredith came around to the car to help Matt.

"Get the IV drip and the cooler of blood bags from the trunk, okay?" Jasmine asked Bonnie before she and Meredith hurried, supporting Matt, toward the front door, which Elena was already holding open.

Matt was in good hands, Bonnie thought, swinging open the trunk. Jasmine wasn't a fighter or magical, but she was scarily efficient. The pole for the IV was in a couple of different pieces—light, made of hollow aluminum, but awkward to carry—and Bonnie had to gather them together a couple of times before she got them tucked securely under one arm and was able to pick up the cooler with the blood bags and the tubing with the other. Everyone else had disappeared into Elena and Damon's apartment building by the time Bonnie slammed the trunk and headed inside.

Her steps faltered for a moment. When had she started thinking of it as

Elena and *Damon's* building, not Elena and Stefan's? Sorrow shot through her, and she suddenly missed Stefan so much.

And now the man—no, the vampire—who'd killed him had gotten away. Bonnie swallowed back her tears, clutching the IV pole. They'd saved Matt. He was hurt, but they'd gotten him out of there. That was the most important thing.

Upstairs, Matt was lying on the couch, and Jasmine immediately got to work setting up the drip. "He lost a lot of blood, but that's the worst of his injuries," she said. "He's going to be fine." There were dried tear tracks on her cheeks, but her fingers were sure as they moved across the medical equipment.

"We're back to square one, aren't we?" Elena asked dismally from her chair near the couch. "Jack and his vampires can't be killed, and he'll keep coming after us."

"He wants Damon dead," Meredith said flatly, "and he wants me back at his side."

Alaric put his arm around her, and she leaned against him, her dark head on his shoulder. "Maybe we should cut our losses and stop hunting him," he said hesitantly. "It might be better to concentrate on keeping away from Jack if we don't have a chance of killing him."

"I agree," Jasmine said, pausing with an IV needle in her hand. "We need to lay low. Matt could have been killed. Any of us could have."

"We're not giving up." Meredith said, her jaw set. Elena nodded.

There was an uneasy silence. Jasmine was glaring down at her hands as she neatly set up the IV and began to rebandage Matt's wounds. Matt moaned softly, and Bonnie saw him flinch, his eyes still firmly closed, but his lashes fluttering. He looked so vulnerable. She was used to thinking of Matt as tough, despite the fact that he was the most human of them.

Bonnie's mouth was dry with nerves suddenly, and she cleared her throat. "I think they're right," she said. "We don't have *anything*. Like Elena said, we're back where we started. And we're the only ones in danger from him here. We don't need to protect anyone else."

Elena and Meredith both stared at her, shocked. The three of them had always joked about their "velociraptor sisterhood," that they always had one another's backs. Bonnie felt a wriggle of guilt, deep inside. But if there was no way forward, maybe it was time to think about retreating.

“Just because we’re back to the beginning doesn’t mean we quit playing,” Elena said sharply. She looked to Damon for support.

But Damon was staring into space. “I’m not sure we have nothing.” His dark eyes narrowed as he spoke to Elena. “Think of what Siobhan told us. She knew Jack would always make himself a back door, in case he needed to get rid of the vampires. Doesn’t that sound right?”

Elena’s face brightened, her irritation turning thoughtful. “You think Siobhan was telling the truth about the poison?”

Damon arched an eyebrow at her. “The best lies always have some basis in reality.”

“So you think there really is a poison somewhere that’ll kill them?” Bonnie asked. “Like an antidote to whatever Jack does that makes them immortal?” There was a general stirring in the room as everyone sat up straighter.

“But Siobhan’s dead,” Elena said. “Even if she knew about a real poison, we can’t get the information out of her now.”

“I’ll go back to Jack’s laboratory in Zurich,” Damon said slowly. “That’s where I found his journal, it’s where everything started. If there’s a poison, he might keep it there.”

“I’m going with you,” Elena said immediately. She was leaning forward now, beginning to smile, her eyes locked on Damon’s as he met her smile with one of his own. They might have been the only two people in the room.

A small motion over by the couch caught Bonnie’s eye. Jasmine was holding Matt’s hand between both of her own, and she bent her head to kiss his knuckles. His eyes were open now, and they were gazing at each other with such a wealth of tenderness that Bonnie had to look away.

Alaric’s arms were wrapped around Meredith, supporting and protecting. She sighed and cuddled against his body. He kissed the top of her head. Elena and Damon were still grinning at each other, delighted with their own cleverness.

Bonnie suddenly *ached* for Zander, an empty hollow ache in the middle of her chest. She remembered the cascading purple blossoms of the mimosa in Mrs. Flowers’s garden, the way their sweet scent had risen from her hands and clothes all the way home, filling her car with the smells of summer. *Joy rising from sorrow. Second chances.* It was as if she could hear Mrs. Flowers whispering in her ear. Finally, Bonnie thought she understood the point of the

story Mrs. Flowers had told her.

No one needed Bonnie now. They were peaceful and safe, each wrapped up with the one they loved. Things were bad, there was no question about it, but they had a moment of calm now, before the storm. She slipped quietly into the hall, pulling out her phone.

Zander picked up on the first ring. “Bon?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

His voice sounded so good, deep and warm with that familiar rough note in it. Bonnie closed her eyes, her whole body relaxing even as tears of relief came into her eyes. She’d been trying so hard *not* to miss him.

She could picture him clearly, his moonlight-blond hair hanging rattily down the back of his neck—he always needed a haircut—his ocean-blue eyes quizzical and gently concerned. She could imagine that he was standing, his weight balanced evenly on the balls of his feet, ready to spring into action if she needed him. Even just if she wanted him.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m saying yes.”

“What?” Zander sounded wary, unsure.

“Yes, I’ll marry you. I’ll come to Colorado. I have to help the others with the Jack situation, but we’ll figure something out.” Bonnie sniffed. There was a silence on the other end of the phone. “Zander, are you there? I love you, Zander. I was an idiot to let you go.”

“And one thing we know is that Ms. Bonnie McCullough is *not* an idiot.” She could hear the smile in Zander’s voice now.

“Damn straight,” she said.

Life was short, for humans like her, and for werewolves, too. And even if she had to leave everything here behind, she was going to marry Zander. Warmth unfurled inside her, and her eyes filled with happy tears.

She’d figure out how to keep helping her friends. But she wasn’t giving up Zander. She was going to spend that life with him, no matter what. True love? True love was worth anything.

[#TVD12LoveConquersAll](#)



The sign in front of the office building read LIFETIME SOLUTIONS. Elena frowned up at it uneasily. “That seems sort of ominous,” she said to Damon. “*Lifetime Solutions*? Isn’t death the only solution to a lifetime?”

It was early evening, and the flow of office workers leaving the building had slowed to a trickle. It was time to make their move.

“We all know what Jack’s solution is, don’t we?” Damon said. “I still have a keycard.” He was dressed in a sleek, beautifully cut, dark suit. His idea, she supposed, of what a Swiss businessman might wear. To Elena, he looked a little too sophisticated for the role, better suited to a magazine spread than a real office. In contrast, she was wearing a skirt and blouse, an outfit she might have worn to her actual job, before Stefan had died and she’d stopped going.

She smoothed her hands over the skirt, wiping her sweaty palms, and raised an eyebrow at Damon. “Shall we?”

They crossed the square and entered the lobby of the Lifetime Solutions building. The security guard glanced at them with interest. Elena’s breath quickened. This was it. The place was probably crawling with Jack’s vampires. Damon slapped the keycard against the automatic door and then, as it opened, he froze. He tried to take a step forward, then jerked to a halt again and frowned at the door.

“What’s up?” Elena said, keeping her voice casual. She looked quickly at the security guard, who was looking in the other direction now.

“I can’t get in,” Damon said softly. “Jack must have done something after I stole his journal. The way’s barred against me.”

Elena stepped through the door and then back out. There was nothing stopping her. “Do you think he’s got a human living in there?” she whispered.

Damon shrugged. “Must be. It wouldn’t stop the vampires he’s made, only the ones like me.”

“Right. Just like sunlight or running water or stakes,” Elena agreed. The

security guard was peering suspiciously at them now, and she forced a laugh. “I can’t believe you forgot it,” she said loudly and nonsensically. Damon was looking at her like she was insane, so she flicked her eyes toward the outer door. “Let’s go get it.”

“New plan,” she said, once they were outside and out of sight of the guard. “Draw me a map of how to get to Jack’s office.” They’d agreed, if he kept the poison anywhere in the building, his private office would be the most likely place. The journal had been there.

Damon tensed. He didn’t like her going in alone, Elena knew. But it was the only solution. “You’ll be careful?” he asked reluctantly.

“Of course.” Elena forced a smile as she took the keycard from his hand. “Make me that map.”

* * *

Her heels seemed to echo unnaturally loudly as she walked across the lobby a second time. But the security guard paid no attention as she used the keycard to pass through the automatic door.

Once the elevator doors had safely shut between them, Elena took a deep breath and pulled the map Damon had made out of her attaché case. Up to the fourth floor.

The elevator doors opened onto a sleek and empty reception area, all grays and whites under soft lighting. It was completely silent; there was no one in sight.

The route Damon had marked out led her past a lab full of caged rats and through a corridor lined with cubicles. She gripped her attaché case in one hand. It was partly intended for camouflage, partly so she’d have something to put the poison in if—no, *when*, she told herself fiercely—she found it.

She hoped it was in Jack’s office, she thought, frowning through a window overlooking a laboratory full of medical equipment.

Lifetime Solutions looked just like any kind of medical research lab. She’d expected something a little more threatening, somehow.

The lights were on everywhere, fluorescent bulbs humming up above her. Even a few computers were still on, but she didn’t see a single person, not until she turned the corner of the hall that led to Jack’s office.

There was a man sitting at a desk outside Jack’s office, a stack of papers in front of him. When Elena turned, he was clearly already expecting her, his

head up and his eyes fixed on where she approached.

He must have heard her footsteps. *Human?* Elena wondered. *Vampire?* She hadn't been particularly stealthy, and the office was quiet. It was perfectly reasonable that he might have heard her, even if he lacked any special powers.

Elena tried to slow her heartbeat, to calm herself down, and kept the smile fixed on her face as she approached him. He watched her placidly, but she thought she saw an eager look cross his face for just a moment, the expression of a predator who scented prey. Was she imagining it?

As she came to a halt in front of his desk, he smiled back up at her, a bland, professional smile. "*Kann ich der helfen, bitte?*" he asked politely.

Oh no. They spoke more than one language in Switzerland, didn't they? She hadn't accounted for that in her plans. At dinner, Damon had ordered for her in French. Elena only spoke English. She could only remember a few phrases from the summer she'd spent in Paris, just enough to be sure this vampire wasn't speaking French.

"Jack sent me for some papers from his office," she said. She kept her voice level and the smile pinned to her face. Did she look as fake as she felt? She tried to channel the persona she had used in the time she'd worked as an executive assistant: calm, polite, professional, slightly bored. "I've come all the way from Virginia, in the United States. It's very important."

For just a moment, something flashed through the man's aura. Something *wrong*, a neon red slicing through the muddy blue. *Vampire. Definitely a vampire*, Elena thought, and just managed to stop herself from taking a step backward.

The vampire's eyes sharpened at her miniscule flinch, taking on an even more predatory gleam. But when he spoke again, his voice was perfectly cordial. "Certainly, Miss. What does Dr. Daltry require?"

All of sudden, it was like something clicked into place, and her Guardian Power bloomed. A new power this time, like she was seeing inside him, watching the rhythms of the vampire's heart and mind. Elena took a quick, excited breath, her heart speeding up again.

"Listen carefully," she told him, and there was a funny, deep echo behind her words, as if someone else, someone Powerful, was speaking in time with her. The vampire relaxed, his mouth tilting into a faint smile, and Elena could see that he *wanted* to obey her.

She wondered...

“Why don’t you come with me?” she said, and the echo was still there. “Help me look.”

With perfect readiness, the vampire rose to his feet. Elena glanced around hurriedly. She was fizzing with nervous excitement. She’d never been able to compel anyone to do what she wanted before. Would this work on everyone? Only on vampires? If her control snapped, he would kill her, she was sure. She forced herself to concentrate, holding onto her Power over him.

There. On the other side of the hall was a plain white door with a bolt. She walked over to it, the vampire following her docilely. It was a supply closet, its shelves neatly lined with envelopes of various sized pads of paper, boxes of paper clips and staples. It was like any supply closet in any office in the world, and Elena felt a funny little pang at the sight of it. It had been good, working in an office, living the daylit life with Stefan. She wouldn’t ever be that girl again.

“Go in,” she told the vampire, listening to the echo of Power behind her own words. He hesitated, though, a small frown creasing his forehead. He was clearly struggling between the force of Elena’s command and his natural inclinations. “Go on,” she said, and tried to put an extra force of will behind it. She could feel him bending beneath her words, and Elena gritted her teeth and *pushed*.

The vampire’s face smoothed out. “Yes, fräulein.” He stepped forward, into the closet.

“Stay,” Elena said hurriedly. “You’re fine there. You won’t need anything.”

She closed the door quietly behind him and flipped the lock. She hoped the command would be enough, and that it would still work when she wasn’t standing right there next to him. The lock wouldn’t be strong enough to hold a vampire for long.

She rapidly crossed the hall again and went into Jack’s office, shutting the door behind her. She leaned against it for a moment, taking a quick gulp of air. There was a lock, thank goodness, and she turned the latch as quietly as she could, her hands shaking.

How long did she have before this new Guardian Power’s effect wore off, she wondered. Or did she have even that long? Were there security cameras watching the hall, would someone have seen her lock him in?

She firmly put it out of her mind. She needed to concentrate on the job

at hand. But she had to work fast.

The office had floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the plaza outside, a coat closet in the corner, and another door that led to a small bathroom. It looked like a normal executive office—desk, cabinets, chairs. Not too many places to hide something secret.

Damon had found Jack's journal in a secret drawer at the back of the desk, so that was the place to start. Elena seated herself in the cushy leather chair behind the desk and slid the top drawer all the way out.

On the top of the back of the drawer, just as Damon had described, was a small keyhole. Pulling the lock picks Damon had given her out of her attaché case, she slid the straight piece of metal into the lock and turned it as far as she could, then carefully inserted the long curved pick. At first, it was just like she was fishing around, rubbing a few pieces of metal together with no effect. But at her fourth try, something shifted. It took a few more tries to manage to push back all the pins inside the cylinder of the lock. Finally, though, the lock turned as neatly and easily as if she'd had the key.

"Gorgeous," Elena breathed to herself. "Let's see."

Nothing. The secret compartment was empty.

Frustrated, she shoved the drawer closed again a little too hard. There was an audible clunk. Elena froze and listened hard. There were probably other vampires in the building, and their hearing would be sharp. But there was no answering sound, and after a moment, she relaxed.

She looked quickly around the room. If the poison wasn't in the secret compartment, where could it be hidden? She began to rifle through the other drawers, pulling them out and looking them over carefully. No more secret compartments, as far as she could see. No keyholes hidden in the backs of these drawers.

There was nothing in the desk, nothing fastened underneath it, either. She got to her feet and looked around. The cabinets? She froze. Had that been a noise? She drew the stake from her attaché case. If it was the vampire secretary, breaking free of her suggestion, maybe she'd be able to take him out for long enough that she could escape.

But there was no other sound. She must have imagined it. Her luck was holding, for now.

The cabinets held nothing but hanging files and, at the bottom of one, a bottle of gin.

Where else? Elena ran her hands under the cushions of the chairs, lifted the paintings on the walls and looked behind them to make sure there was no concealed safe. The closet was empty, except for a long black coat and an umbrella. Elena swung the door shut.

Wait. The memory of her favorite hiding place back home made her look in the closet again, more carefully.

There were the faintest lines across the floor. A square. Elena hurried back to the desk and found a thin bronze letter opener. She stuck it into one of the cracks and slowly pried up the panel.

Below the panel was another locked compartment.

Her hands were shaking now, and she dropped the thin pick twice before she got it in the lock properly.

Sitting at the bottom of this hidden compartment was a square box, maybe eight inches on each side, made of black metal. *Please*, Elena thought. *Please*. Carefully, she snapped back the latches and opened the box.

Inside, neatly clipped into place along the sides of the box, were six hypodermics full of shimmering blue liquid.

Elena took a moment to marvel that Siobhan had bothered to make her false poison the right color. Perhaps she really had possessed some of the poison, although she hadn't given it to Elena and Damon. Maybe they should have searched the cave and Siobhan's cabin in the woods.

Better still, there were some papers inside the box that, based on Elena's quick glance, seemed like they might be the research notes on how Jack had developed the formula.

She sent a wave of victory, of joy, through the connection to Damon. He'd know what she meant.

As carefully as she could, hyperaware of how fragile a syringe was, she packed the box into her case and glanced around the room. If it held other secrets, she hadn't uncovered them. And staying any longer would be pushing her luck.

Elena smoothed down her skirt and straightened her blouse. There was one last thing she needed to do.

Leaving Jack's office, she was careful to leave the door slightly cracked, the way she'd found it. There was only silence in the hall, no sound coming from the supply closet. Her luck had held: no one seemed to have yet noticed

that anything was amiss.

When she opened the supply closet, the vampire was facing the shelves of envelopes, calm and relaxed, just as she'd left him. Power thrummed through her, and she felt the tendril that held him in place, running straight from her to him. He turned to look amiably at her, awaiting her next instruction.

Elena whipped out the hypodermic she'd been holding behind her back, jammed it into the side of his throat, and pushed the plunger.

The effect was instantaneous. The vampire choked, his eyes bulging. He brought his hands up to claw at his throat, pushing the empty hypodermic away. The gentle spell he had seemed to be under snapped. "What are you doing to me?" he gasped, his voice strangled. "*What did you do?*"

He fell heavily to the floor, panting. A thin stream of drool ran out across his chin. He seemed to be struggling to move, tiny twitches of his arms and legs, but he wasn't getting anywhere. His eyes, red and watering, fixed on Elena. "Help me," he whispered.

Elena hardened her heart. "You would have killed me if you had the chance, you know you would," she said. He only blinked, looking up at her with a dazed expression. "Wouldn't you?" she demanded, letting a thread of the compelling echo slide into her voice.

The dying vampire twitched again. His eyes rolled back into his head. He was dead.

Steeling herself, Elena took hold of the vampire's legs and dragged him into Jack's office, where he wouldn't be found as easily. He was heavy, and his head bumped roughly against the doorframe as she pulled him through. Despite herself, Elena winced at the thump.

She pulled him over to the coat closet where the poison had been hidden and wedged him inside. Closing the closet door, she turned the latch, locking his body inside.

Combing her hair and touching up her makeup, Elena made sure that she was pristine again before she left Jack's office. It was better not to look like she had been dragging corpses around if she wanted to get out of here unquestioned. With luck, no one would look for the dead vampire until tomorrow.

She could feel Damon radiating anxiety through their bond, now that she had a moment to realize it.

She tried to send him reassurance and joy—they'd found it, they'd succeeded—but the emotions she was feeling from Damon didn't calm down. He'd be happy once she was out of Lifetime Solutions. That black box would ensure Damon's safety. Vengeance for Stefan's death.

Coming down in the elevator, Elena allowed herself for a moment to wonder if now they'd be able to move on.

No one stopped her as she crossed the lobby. Elena's heart beat faster. She was going to make it out.

Outside, it was now fully dark, and the plaza was deserted.

"Damon?" Elena called. "I've got it." She could sense him, somewhere nearby.

"Elena." Jack's voice. A cold shiver ran down her back. Elena turned around.

Jack had his arm wrapped around Damon, a stake sunk halfway into Damon's chest. As she watched, he pushed the stake in a little farther, and a circle of bright blood began to spread across Damon's shirt. "Elena," Jack said again. "I think we need to talk."



“The stake’s touching his heart,” Jack said. “I can kill him in a second. Give me the poison, and I’ll let your boyfriend go.”

Damon could hardly breathe, and with each tiny movement of the stake in Jack’s hand, he felt dizzy and drained. His whole chest burned as if it were on fire. He stood as still as he could and fixed his eyes on Elena, willing her to listen to the message he was trying to send her. *Don’t give it to him. Run away.*

He didn’t *want* to die. But he couldn’t live with himself if they let go of their only chance of killing Jack. Not when Jack had killed Stefan, killed Katherine.

Besides, if Elena did hand over the poison, he would probably shove the stake through Damon’s heart anyway. They knew by now that they couldn’t trust him.

Carefully, Damon tensed his muscles little by little, keeping himself fully aware of the stake. His best chance would be to wait for Jack to be distracted, and then to take him down quickly. Protect Elena, and perhaps even save himself. Adrenaline began to burn beneath his skin in anticipation of a fight.

“What’s it going to be?” Jack said, thrusting the stake a fraction of an inch deeper. Damon flinched.

Elena didn’t answer. She was standing very still, her eyes dark and huge in her pale face. *She looked*, Damon thought, *like someone about to be burned at the stake.*

“Stop this,” she said, and Damon felt a pulse of Power coming from her. Jack laughed and shook his head. Whatever Elena was trying, it wasn’t working.

Damon shut his eyes for just a moment. His heart was pulsing around the stake, sending steady throbs of pain through his body. It made it hard to think.

It wouldn't be so bad to die if he had to, he supposed. He had loved. He had lived.

If only he could be sure that Jack would let Elena go.

The stake against his heart jerked, hard, and Damon's eyes flew open.

Jack yanked the stake entirely out of Damon's chest, his arm flinging wide and the stake clattering to the ground. Damon took his cue and leaped forward, ready to fight, but there was no fight to have, not right now.

Jack was being pulled backward, away from Damon, with short, jerky steps. His arms were drawn up and suspended in midair, even as his body writhed, struggling. His face was twisted with rage.

Damon, his hand covering the wound on his chest, turned around to stare at Elena. As he watched, her hands came up and moved, her long elegant fingers plucking in time to the motion of Jack's limbs, puppet master to Jack's puppet. Her eyes were shining, and she looked triumphant.

"Good girl," Damon breathed. "Beautiful."

He had never seen Elena use her Guardian Powers with such precision before. Elena twitched a finger and Jack's head snapped backward with an outraged snarl. He was utterly at her mercy.

Damon headed for Elena and found himself stumbling, moving at half the speed he usually could. Fresh blood was pumping out of his chest and streaming down his body as he moved. *The suit would be ruined*, he thought dazedly. His body was trying to knit itself together, but there was too much damage. He needed to feed.

"Use the poison," Elena murmured as he came up to her. Her eyes were fixed unwaveringly on Jack, as if a glance aside would break her power over him.

Damon fumbled open the briefcase at her feet, unlatching the box he found inside. Five needles full of the poison, each shimmering softly in the light of the moon overhead. He grabbed one, unclipping it from the side of the box, and held it tightly but carefully as he turned back toward Jack.

Jack's eyes fixed on the hypodermic, and his eyes widened. For the first time, he looked afraid.

But Elena's control was beginning to slip, Damon could see. As Damon got closer, the self-made vampire lunged toward him, grabbing desperately at the hypodermic with one hand, even as the rest of his body jerked at Elena's

command.

Damon grabbed hold of the free arm, trying to force it into stillness as he raised the syringe. Maybe he could inject it here, right in the vein at the crook of the elbow.

He hesitated just for a split second, looking for the long blue line of the vein, and in that second Elena lost control. Like his puppet strings had been suddenly cut, Jack fell forward, knocking Damon to the ground. The syringe fell from his hand, skittering away across the concrete of the plaza.

Damon sucked in a breath, dazed for a moment, and Jack's fangs sunk into his throat, ripping and tearing. *Can't lose more blood*, Damon reminded himself, and struggled, shoving the other vampire away. His teeth gouged at Damon's throat as they came out, and Damon clawed viciously at Jack's face, trying to take some vengeance.

He was holding Jack away, far enough that he couldn't bite, but the other vampire's hands fumbled at his chest. They found the wound above Damon's heart and roughly, slowly, wormed their way within.

Damon gasped in shock. He could feel Jack's long fingers *inside him*, reaching for his heart.

Everything went gray for a moment, and when the world snapped back into color, Damon's chest was going cold. He tried to gasp for air, but Jack was above him, blocking out the sky, his presence suffocating.

Just beside Damon, something glimmered. The syringe. Slowly, as if someone else was moving it, Damon saw his own hand slide toward it and pick it up. He fumbled for a second, and it almost fell again. And then, with new strength, he gripped the syringe and shoved it against Jack's neck.

Everything went gray. He must have lost consciousness, because when he blinked back into awareness, time seemed to have passed. Elena was pulling Jack's weight off of him and kneeling by Damon's side. Her lips were moving, but he couldn't hear what she said.

And then, with the force of a sudden slap, light and sound came back into the world.

"—please, I don't think I can take it," Elena was saying. Damon smiled at her. It seemed to take a lot more effort than it usually did.

The ragged bite on his throat burned, and he could feel a lukewarm trickle of blood running down his side. But warmth flooded him as he looked

up at Elena. She looked like an angel. "I love you," he said. "Always." It seemed so simple.

Beside them, Jack gave a rattling gasp, and Damon turned his head to look at him, the concrete cold and gritty against his cheek.

"Lucia," Jack muttered. His eyes were wet and bloodshot. A strange, rank smell, like rotting meat, rose from him, and Damon wrinkled his nose, clutching at the wound on his own chest. "You have to understand," Jack said fiercely. "Someone has to know why I did it. I loved Lucia, but Siobhan loved me. And then I found out Siobhan was a vampire." He coughed, a loose hacking cough, and a stream of drool ran across his chin.

"And you wanted her Power for yourself," Elena said coolly.

Jack groaned and shook his head. "No, it wasn't about that. Lucia got sick. All the doctors said she would die. I was half-crazy... Siobhan came when I called her, but she wouldn't change Lucia, wouldn't fix her."

Jack's lips twitched into a smile again, stiffer and more horrible, the rictus grin of a dying man. "But I had another plan. I would make Siobhan save her, and I'd make myself a vampire, too. We'd live forever, together. Strong and well."

"Something happened, though," Elena said. Her voice was a little warmer, Damon thought. Elena understood why someone would do terrible things for love. "Your plan didn't work."

Blood trickled down Jack's chin now, and he moaned and twitched as if he wanted to wipe it away but couldn't raise his hands. His eyes rolled from side to side, as if he were seeing something too horrible to look at directly. "I found Lucia's poor body, she was torn apart... I was going to kill them all. I'd make more vampires, stronger, better ones, and we'd hunt down Siobhan and her kind." He looked from Elena to Damon, his eyes pleading. "I know... we're monsters. But when the vampires are dead, I'll kill my creations. It was the only way I could fight them. Let me live. Let me finish."

His own lukewarm blood running through his fingers, Damon slowly shook his head. So what if Jack thought he was a hero? He had murdered Stefan, and he deserved to die.

Elena wrapped her arms around herself. She looked young and vulnerable, but she was Damon's strong girl. "No," she said. "This is the end, Jack."

Jack choked and gagged, a harsh cough tearing from his throat. "Let me

make the world safe,” he said weakly, when the coughing fit finally ended, “Please. I’m not a bad man.”

He took one final rattling breath and then his chest stilled and everything was silent.

Damon took a breath of his own and stared up at the half-moon sailing high above the plaza, his chest feeling raw and painful. Jack was dead. They had their vengeance for Stefan now, and it was all over.

He had thought that it would feel better, more complete. But the flush of joy he’d felt had faded, and the ache was still inside him. Stefan was dead. He felt a slender, warm hand take his, and he turned to Elena. “We did it,” she said softly, and Damon leaned against her. The bond between them was flooding with relief, and Damon felt his slow heart speed up a bit as he held onto Elena’s hand. “We did,” he agreed, watching the soft glow of her skin in the moonlight. “Now we can go home.”

[#TVD12MissionAccomplished](#)

Three weeks had passed since Damon and Elena killed Jack, far away in Switzerland. Since then, none of them had been able to take more than a second to focus on anything except preparing for Bonnie's wedding. *And now it was a beautiful day for the ceremony*, Matt thought. They were all together, safe and whole.

The sky was blue and open, the only clouds above tiny and puffy white. Birds sang in the trees—the long trill of a warbler, the three short notes of a whippoorwill. Wild violets were blooming in the grass at their feet. Matt ran a finger around the inside of his collar, easing where it pressed against the bandage on his throat.

"Dude, if you forgot the ring, Zander's going to kill you," Spencer whispered to Jared beside him.

"Forget Zander, *Shay* will kill me first. She said I'd better learn to take a little responsibility," Jared muttered back. "Anyway, I didn't forget it, I just can't find it." He was digging through his pockets frantically, shaggy hair flopping over his forehead.

Matt resisted rolling his eyes. He was honored to be the only non-werewolf in Zander's side of the wedding party. The werewolves were great guys for a pickup game of football or a night of barhopping, and amazing allies in a fight. For a formal occasion? Matt felt like he'd spent the last three weeks babysitting a pack of overgrown kids. The fun bachelor party had almost made up for the nightmarish tuxedo fittings, though.

"Try the inner breast pocket of your jacket," he whispered to Jared.

Jared felt inside his jacket and immediately smiled, a big dimpled grin. "Thanks, Matt."

"*Loser*," Marcus whispered from his other side, and Jared snorted and smacked Marcus on the back of his head.

"Cut it out," Matt whispered. The guys straightened up and stilled beside him as Zander came to join them, smiling nervously and shoving his pale blond hair out of his eyes.

A Celtic harp began to play, and the gathered audience rose to their feet.

Bonnie's older sisters came down the path first, pretty and solemn-faced in rose pink. Then came Shay, Zander's second-in-command, who smirked at Jared as she stepped into place beside the sisters. Meredith followed, tall, slim, and elegant, her head held high. Then Elena, her golden hair pulled back and a soft smile on her face.

The girls arranged themselves in a line in front of the minister and a hushed expectancy fell over the crowd.

They all stood and turned as Bonnie appeared, arm in arm with her beaming father. Her strapless dress was long and lacy, and her red hair shone in the sunlight. She didn't wear a veil, but a circlet of white rosebuds, and she carried a bouquet of white roses in full bloom.

She looked like everything a bride was supposed to be, Matt thought: *beautiful, excited, a little shy.* Like a princess. Mostly, Bonnie looked happy.

She squeezed her father's arm as they came up to the others, and he kissed her, let her go, and stepped back. Bonnie looked up at Zander and reached out to take his large hands in her smaller ones. He bent his head to look down at her and gave her the slow, sweet smile Matt had never seen him give to anyone but Bonnie.

Automatically, Matt glanced into the audience, looking for Jasmine, and found her seated a few rows back. Her sweet mouth curved in a private smile just for him. Something warm blossomed in Matt's chest.

He'd miss Bonnie when she went to Colorado with Zander. But love was love was love, and, basking in the light of Jasmine's sweet smile, he couldn't wish for anything else for Bonnie. This, he knew, was what was going to make his friend happy.

The minister spread his arms in greeting, and the audience sat and settled. The wedding party turned their attention to him politely. Bonnie's brown-eyed gaze was confident and steady, the sunlight making her porcelain skin glow.

"Dearly beloved..." the minister began.

Bonnie, always the baby of their group, was now so sure and poised that a flare of affection lit in Matt's chest. He could see the skinny kid, the sassy teenager, the clear-eyed woman, all in the same person, and for a moment, he was just so grateful for her, for all of them. They'd all found someone, his little band of friends: Bonnie and Zander, Meredith and Alaric—even Elena

would find her way back to Damon, he knew. And he had Jasmine.

Beloved...



As Damon sat in the front row of seats, watching the ceremony, it occurred to him that his little redbird really had grown up. She was looking lovely, too, her face tilted politely to the minister's as she gave the appropriate responses: yes, she would have and hold, yes, she would love and honor. The overgrown werewolf boy beside her was clearly over the moon with joy, as he should be. Bonnie was too good for him.

Damon couldn't help it as his attention drifted from little bridal Bonnie to his Elena, standing beside her. What was she thinking, his princess, behind her solemn and attentive facade? Was she wishing she and Stefan had gone through this ritual when they'd had the chance? Was she regretting all that she'd lost?

She'd loved his brother with her whole heart, and it would have been strange if she *hadn't* thought of that now, mourned the life they'd lost as she watched Bonnie and Zander embarking on theirs.

Or... could Elena be thinking of him?

He probed carefully at their bond, but got only a general contentment, a warm joy at her friend's happiness. If there was a certain wistfulness about her joy, it didn't seem to center around anyone in particular. Not that she let Damon see, at least.

Elena had let him kiss her, in the car while they hunted Siobhan. More than that, she had drawn on his energy, charged her own Power. It had been more intimate than any of their kisses before, and he still felt an echo of that closeness.

He knew what that kiss had meant to him. The question was, what had it meant to Elena? They hadn't talked about it. Since the night three weeks before when they'd killed Jack, they'd been cautious and polite with each other, circling each other warily in the confines of Elena's apartment. Every once in a while, though, he'd felt the brush of her regard, turned to see Elena's lapis lazuli eyes watching him thoughtfully and with affection.

Damon permitted himself, sometimes, to hope.

The minister said, with a smile, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," and Bonnie leaned up for Zander's kiss, her face shining.

Damon stood with the rest as the bridal party went down the path, and

then followed and joined them as waiters passed around champagne.

Bonnie's father cleared his throat, holding his glass aloft. "My baby girl..." he began, tears in his eyes. Damon let his gaze drift around the circle of faces. Bonnie's family was so ordinary—balding middle-management father, comfortably plump mother, two round-faced practical older sisters. His redbird was like a rare rose in a garden of dandelions.

"Like the cliché goes, I'm not losing a daughter, I'm gaining a son," Bonnie's father said, putting an awkward hand on Zander's shoulder. Everyone smiled, and Damon felt a small stir of sentiment. At least they adored her, Bonnie's plebian suburban family. They'd never quite comprehend how fiery and sweet and full of Power she was. But they loved her.

When Bonnie's father finished his toast with a clumsy kiss on his daughter's cheek, Jared raised his glass. Damon hid his smile with a sip of champagne. This ought to be amusing.

"Uh..." the shaggy-haired werewolf began. "When Zander started dating Bonnie, we all thought she was awesome, but we were, like, 'Really?' because she wasn't, uh, the same kind of person we were." The boy paused, and his eyes traveled slowly around the circle of attentive faces.

Damon could see the moment when he realized he was going to have to make this speech without using the words *wolf*, *Pack*, or *Alpha*. Without that, the whole lot of them were going to sound like a bunch of weirdly close-knit overgrown frat boys. Fair enough, really.

On the other side of the circle, Zander's Beta girl—Shay, that was it—twitched, and Damon could tell she was longing to smack the boy over the head.

Jared stumbled over his words, stared down at his feet, his floppy hair falling over his eyes, and finally looked up, smiling, dimples creasing his cheeks, and launched into an anecdote about Bonnie and Zander together. *There was a little more alcohol in the story, Damon thought, than Bonnie's mother would have preferred, but his affection for them both shone through.* Werewolf crisis averted.

Elena's arm brushed his as she stepped up next to him, and they exchanged a look of perfect understanding, amusement flowing through the bond between them.

Letting his attention wander again, Damon fingered a small rounded

package in his pocket.

When the toasts were over, he pulled Bonnie aside. Zander followed amiably, a glass of champagne in his hand, and Elena stayed near them, watching. The rest of the wedding guests were drifting toward the tent set up on the other side of the meadow, where a band was warming up on the dance floor.

“Congratulations,” Damon said formally. “I have a little something for you.” He handed Bonnie the small package, wrapped in black silk.

“But you already gave us a present,” Bonnie said, taken aback.

“I suppose so,” Damon said. Elena had ordered something from the registry from them both, he vaguely recalled—silver, perhaps, or some sort of kitchen appliance. These were the traditional gifts now, apparently. “But this is something for *you*.”

Looking intrigued, Bonnie slipped the silk away from her present. A glossy white stone shone in her hand, half the size of her palm, with glistening highlights of green and blue. In its top was deeply etched a rough representation of a wolf’s face.

“A moonstone,” Bonnie said, examining it. “They’re supposed to help keep the bond between lovers strong.” She looked touched, her eyes soft, as she ran her finger across the carving.

“It seemed appropriate. This particular one is quite old. I got it from an acquaintance in Zurich. Legend says that it gives its owner power over werewolves.” Damon couldn’t resist shooting a sly smile at Zander, but the wolf-boy only laughed.

“She’s got plenty of power over me already,” he said, and squeezed Bonnie’s hand.

“Oh, *Damon*,” Bonnie said, and, letting go of Zander, flung her arms around Damon’s neck.

Damon kissed her gently on the top of her head. Her red curls smelled as sweet as cherry candy. He hoped she’d be very happy.

“Behave yourself, wolf,” he said sternly, looking at Zander over Bonnie’s head. Zander tilted his head up in acknowledgment, his face open and guileless.

Elena came closer, and Damon let Bonnie go.

“Come on then, princess,” he said, holding out his hand to Elena. He

nodded toward the dance floor, where the musicians had begun to play. “Let’s dance.”



Her arms around Alaric’s neck, Meredith swayed with him in time to the slow, romantic song. The cake had just been cut, Bonnie and Zander feeding each other as they laughed, a smudge of icing high on Zander’s cheek. The dance floor was emptier than it had been all night. Most of the guests were laughing and chattering as they ate. But Meredith didn’t want to be with everyone else, not even Elena, or Bonnie’s family, who she’d known for most of her life. Not now.

“Remember our wedding?” Alaric said softly, his hand firm against her back. Meredith nodded against Alaric’s shoulder. Theirs had been more formal, two hundred guests in a church instead of fifty in a meadow, but she had been as happy as Bonnie’s glowing face was right now.

“Bonnie caught my bouquet,” she remembered.

“Well, I guess that worked out, then.” Alaric grinned. He led her into a long, lazy twirl. “I hope they’re as happy as we are.”

She could smell their blood, all these guests, mixed in with the smells of hair gel and icing sugar. She’d need to go out to the woods and feed later tonight.

Alaric smoothed his hand down her back. He must have felt her stiffen. “You’re not a monster.” His heart beat steadily, a comforting sound. She pulled back a little and looked at him. Alaric’s skin was the golden tan he turned in the summer, darker freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose. He looked at her with total confidence, his brown eyes warm and trusting. “You *choose* not to be a monster.”

He believed everything he said, Meredith knew. He was sure she wouldn’t fall, sure she could resist the call of human blood, keep her humanity. She sighed and laid her head on his shoulder again.

“I’ll probably be like this forever,” she said. They’d found a poison to kill Jack, but in all his notes, there still hadn’t been any mention of a cure.

“We’ll find a way to fix this,” Alaric said, moving steadily in time to the music. “But even if we don’t, I’m still in. Till death do us part.”

Meredith laughed, a dry, almost painful laugh. “You’re the one who’s keeping me human. You think I’m so strong, but it’s all you.”

It was true, she thought, truer than Alaric would ever believe.

“When we cut the cake,” Alaric said. “And you fed me a piece, I looked at you, and I thought, *Here. This is where I want to be forever.*”

“I know,” Meredith said.

All she wanted was a human life with Alaric. Their little apartment, studying and talking, those discussions on any topic under the sun that fired them up and kept them debating late into the night. She wanted to wake up next to him and eat breakfast together, come home and kiss him hello and make dinner, go to bed together. Go on vacations. Have children. Grow older. Every day for the rest of their lives.

“I don’t want you to drink it,” she said suddenly to Alaric, and felt him tense in her arms. He knew what she was talking about. That bottle of shining effervescence, the water of Eternal Life and Youth.

She tried to put all the aching love she felt for him, for the normal human life they should have together, that sometimes felt so far out of reach. “I don’t want you to live forever. I don’t want either of us to. Till death do us part, like you said. That’s the way it’s *supposed* to be.”

Alaric ran his fingers lightly over her cheek, kissed her once, twice, soft brushes of his lips. “We’re going to find a cure,” he said, pulling her closer. “I promise.”



Bonnie kicked off her high-heeled shoes to walk in the wet grass of the meadow, hand in hand with Zander, her dearest friends around her. Elena and Damon, Meredith and Alaric, Matt and Jasmine, walking together, happy and tired. Shay, who had caught the bouquet, trailed behind, holding hands with Jared.

It was getting late, and the stars were shining brightly overhead.

“This has been the best wedding ever,” she said.

“Totally unbiased opinion there,” Matt said behind her, and everyone laughed.

Everyone she loved most had come to Bonnie’s wedding. When they’d slipped out of the tent, Mrs. Flowers had been deep in conversation with friendly, freckled Alysia, who’d worked with Bonnie to help her reach her full magical potential. Bonnie’s older sisters, Mary and Nora, shared a slice of cake at the same table, Bonnie’s baby nephew peacefully asleep in Nora’s lap.

The whole Pack had been there, and the High Wolf Council had come to give Zander their blessing. Rick, Marilise, and Poppy, whom Bonnie had

practiced magic with in Chicago, had come. Friends of both Bonnie and Zander's from college whom they hadn't seen for ages. Sue Carson from high school. Bonnie's parents had danced to Motown, and her Scottish grandmother had read Bonnie's palm, promising her a long and happy married life.

Almost everyone she loved. Her heart ached a little for Stefan, who should have been with them, but she knew he would have rejoiced for her, too.

"We got *married*," she told Zander, her voice full of awe.

"I know," he said solemnly. "Crazy, huh?"

"Do you feel any different, Bonnie?" Elena asked, amused.

"Sort of," Bonnie said, tipping her head back to look up at the stars. Her hair had come mostly out of its French braid and long strands tickled her shoulders. "Happier."

"Me too," Zander said softly.

There was a magnolia tree near them, its heavy waxy white blossoms hanging overhead, filling the air with their sweet, heady scent. Bonnie considered the tree for a moment. She reached for the Power inherent in the earth, wiggling her toes into the cold damp grass, feeling the soil beneath.

Every kind of life was connected. Everything in the universe had its own Power. If there was one truth Bonnie had learned, it was that. Cupping her hands into the shape of a magnolia blossom, she curled her toes against the soil, thought of the distant stars, and *lifted*.

On the tree branch above, a magnolia blossom slowly began to fill with light. Another one lit, and then another, until the whole tree was gently glowing. Alaric let out a low sound of appreciation.

Bonnie flicked a finger, and a blossom detached itself from the tree. Borne up as if on a breeze, it floated gently into the sky. Another followed, then more, until a trail of glowing blossoms, like little lanterns, floated up above the trees. They hovered and dispersed, sailing off in all directions.

"Wow," Matt said. Bonnie looked at him, looked at them all, their faces upturned and gently lit by the glowing blossoms and the stars.

"I'm going to miss you guys," she said softly. But she smiled. Zander's arms went around her waist, and he gently kissed her cheek.

It was all going to work out. No matter where Bonnie went, no matter

what new danger threatened, she and her friends would never lose each other. Somehow, in that moment, Bonnie was sure of it.

[#TVD12WeddingBells](#)



Still in her bridesmaid's gown, Elena turned onto Maple Street and stopped the car in front of her childhood home. Her house, she reminded herself. Stefan had bought it for her.

Stefan. She curled into herself for a moment, pressing her forehead against the cool window as she looked at the house.

She had always intended to marry Stefan. She had felt like she was *already* married to him really, bonded together in all the ways that mattered. But she'd wanted the celebration, too. She'd thought about it idly: herself in an elegantly simple, flowing gown, her baby sister Margaret in the periwinkle-blue that brought out her eyes. Stefan, handsome and strong, his often melancholy eyes glowing with joy.

She'd counted on that wedding. But when you knew you had *forever*, there wasn't a lot of impetus to do everything right away.

Then Stefan had died, and *forever* was over.

Elena straightened up and wiped at her eyes with both hands. They'd gotten their vengeance, she and Damon. They killed Stefan's murderer. Jack had died in terrible pain, and at their hands.

It didn't make any difference, though, not to the way Elena felt. They'd come home from Zurich, and the wound left by Stefan's death was still raw inside her, a constant gnawing ache. After they'd killed Jack, she'd expected to feel better, to feel like she'd given Stefan something. But it hadn't helped.

She'd never gotten to say good-bye to Stefan. Bonnie had tried so hard, but they hadn't been able to find him.

And today, standing with the bridesmaids at Bonnie's wedding, listening to the minister, she'd suddenly been flooded with thoughts of *Damon*. Damon, who'd looked up at her from the ground in that Swiss courtyard, blood streaming from his wounds, and told her he *loved her*. Damon, with whom she'd always had a special bond, even before the Guardians had made it literal. Gorgeous, sardonic, clever Damon.

Stefan's brother.

She couldn't love him back. Not the way he wanted her to, the way that maybe she wanted to, as well. Not while Stefan was still waiting for her, somewhere out of reach.

She sat perfectly still in the driver's seat for a minute, just staring at the house where she'd grown up.

When she thought of home, her true home, it wasn't the apartment she and Stefan had lived in together, where Damon now slept on the couch. It was here, the house she'd lived in for the first part of her life, until after the Salvatore brothers had come to Fell's Church and everything had changed.

When this is over, we're going to go everywhere, she remembered Stefan saying. I'll show you all the places I've been, and we'll find new parts of the world together. But we'll have your house, the place you grew up in, to come home to. We'll have a home together.

She had cried then, full of joy and tenderness, and now her eyes filled with tears again. It was all such a waste.

They'd never had a chance to come here together, not as the house's owners. She didn't know if she was going to keep the house now, or sell it. Maybe she would lock it up and leave it just the way it was. Let it be drowned in cobwebs, like Miss Havisham's wedding cake.

But she had needed to come here once. It would be, somehow, rude and wrong to not accept Stefan's last gift.

Damon had offered to come with her. But she couldn't bring him on her first visit to the home Stefan had bought for them both. This was something she had to do alone.

If she was ever going to move forward, she had to face the future she and Stefan would have had together. She had to let it go.

Elena got out of the car and walked quickly across the lawn, her heels leaving little holes in the grass. She passed the big quince tree and climbed the steps to the front porch.

The key turned in the lock, but when Elena flicked the light switch, nothing happened. Of course, the electricity must have been turned off. It had been months. That would be the first thing she'd have to get settled.

Pausing for a moment, she realized that she had decided: This was her house. She was keeping it.

Aunt Judith, Robert, and Margaret had taken the furniture with them to their new apartment in Richmond, but there was a candle on the window ledge by the front door.

She lit the candle with the matches she found beside it and tucked the matches into the tiny purse, matching her bridesmaid's dress, which she carried over one shoulder.

The flickering flame of the candle sent shadows sliding wildly across the walls. Climbing the stairs, Elena automatically skipped over the squeaky fifth step. She remembered skipping the same step when she had snuck out at night to cruise the quiet, darkened streets of Fell's Church in Meredith's car, when they were high school juniors.

She could still see the unfaded patches of wallpaper where picture frames had hung. She could imagine each in her mind's eye: her parents, Margaret as a baby, prom, Aunt Judith and Robert's wedding, Stefan and Elena, their arms around each other.

Her heart ached. They should have come here together.

At the end of the upstairs hall was the door to her old bedroom. Part of Elena didn't even want to go in. She remembered lying there with Stefan, how he would speed away when Aunt Judith approached so she wouldn't get into trouble. It had been a more innocent time.

There were also the windows she'd peered out every morning, where she'd seen Stefan striding across the lawn. The secret space beneath her closet floor where she had hidden her diary. A hundred slumber parties, when she and Meredith and Bonnie, and Caroline, who had been her friend then, had giggled and shared secrets, a score of evenings before high school dances when they'd done their makeup together and talked about boys.

Memories of Damon landing on her bedroom window as a crow, more than once. He'd laid beside her on the bed, after escaping the Dark Dimension, when she'd been so happy just to realize that he was still alive.

Ready for a flood of memories, Elena turned the knob and went inside.

"Elena," the voice was soft but unmistakable, full of love and longing.

"*Stefan*," she said, and dropped the candle. The flame went out and left her in total darkness.

Strong arms circled her, and Elena let herself fall into them. She was surrounded by the familiar smell that meant Stefan—something green and

growing, and just a touch of exotic spice. Tears ran down her cheeks. “Stefan,” she sobbed, and buried her head in his shoulder, wrapping her arms around him. He was shaking, crying, too, a gentle hand running through her hair.

“You’re not really here,” she whispered, clutching his strong, well-remembered arms, reaching up to touch his face.

And even though she had just been thinking about how Damon had been dead and returned and come back to her alive again, she knew that what she said was true. Stefan was solid in her arms, but no matter how hard she clutched at him, something in her, something she could feel was true told her: *No. Not yours. Not anymore.*

Stefan let out a long breath, and he held her tightly against him for one more moment, and then he let her go. “No,” he said softly, sorrowfully. “I’m only visiting, and we don’t have long.”

Elena knelt and felt around on the floor for the candle. When her hands finally closed around it, she stood and dug the matches out of her purse to relight the flame.

When the candle was lit once more, she could see Stefan. He was *there*, watching her with his leaf-green eyes. She’d never thought she’d see them again.

“We tried,” she said, gasping. It seemed important that he know this. “Bonnie and I, we tried to reach you. And you weren’t anywhere. Do you mean to tell me that all I had to do was come *here*?”

Stefan had been watching her gravely, his eyes sad, his perfect mouth with its little sensual curve, turned down. “I guess so,” he said. “Or rather, when you were ready to come here, I could, too.”

Not wasting another moment, Elena stepped forward and caught him in a kiss. “I’ve missed you so much,” she said, half-laughing, half-crying against his lips. “This—to see that you’re okay, that you’re not just... gone.”

Stefan pressed his lips against hers and Elena fell into the kiss, feeling his love and longing, the sorrow he felt at having left her and the joy that she had survived, that she was turning her face back toward the sun, finding pleasure in life again.

When they broke the kiss, he held her close. “I’m all right,” he said. “I’ve gone on, but it’s okay. I’ll always love you.” Elena gave a half-sob, reaching up to stroke his cheek, touch his hair, reassure herself that he was

there.

Stefan caught her hand and kissed it. “Listen, Elena,” he said softly. “I don’t want you to stop because of me. You’re going to live forever, Elena, you have to *live*. You can’t pretend I’m coming back.”

Elena opened her mouth to speak, but Stefan shook his head. “If it’s Damon... We were all tangled up when I was alive, but now...” He shrugged. “He’s always understood parts of you that I didn’t, and he loves like he does everything else. With all he has.”

Elena shook her head. It felt wrong to think about this, talk about this, with Stefan in her arms. “I want *you*,” she said. “I didn’t stop loving you. I won’t.”

Stefan pulled her closer, dropped a kiss on the crown of her head. “You don’t have to. But you don’t have to mourn me forever, either.”

He was already fading. She tried to hold onto him, but it was like holding onto a shadow. He lowered his mouth and kissed her one last time, sweet but barely there. “It’s up to you,” he told her. “But know I’m all right. And tell Damon I’m sorry for all the bad blood between us. We were brothers again, by the end.”

“I will, Stefan, I will.” Elena was sobbing freely, trying to hold onto Stefan as his image wavered, his voice getting softer.

“Live well, Elena. I’ll *always* love you.”

And then Stefan was gone.

[#TVD12TheGoodbye](#)

* * *

Three hours later, Elena was back in Dalcrest. Dawn was breaking, and sleepy birds began chirping to each other in the trees as she let herself into the apartment.

Damon was standing by the windows in the living room, waiting for her. She stopped and stared at him, struck anew by how beautiful he was—fine boned and sleekly arrogant—and how different from classically profiled, noble-faced Stefan.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Elena realized she must look a mess, her gown stained with the dust of the uninhabited house, her eyes wild, her hair disheveled, her face streaked with tears.

“I’ve always loved you,” she said. “I won’t ever stop loving Stefan, but

that doesn't mean my feelings for you are any less."

For a moment, Damon's eyes shone and a soft smile broke over his face.

But then he hesitated, and his gaze clouded over. *Stefan*. Like a shout, the word hung in the air between them. Elena knew that, somehow, loving her felt like more of a betrayal to him than it ever had when Stefan was alive.

"I saw Stefan," she said. "Stefan's ghost. He was in my house in Fell's Church. He couldn't stay long, but he was there."

Damon sucked in a startled breath. For a moment, his expression was full of wonder and alarm, and then it went smooth and perfectly blank, the way it always did when Damon was concealing strong emotion.

"No," Elena said sharply, and took a quick step across the living room to grab hold of Damon's arm. "No, he was fine. He seemed... content. He wants us to be happy. He wants me to keep living, to go after what I want." She tried to smile at Damon, although her face felt stiff and strange. "He had a message he wanted me to give you."

Damon's face softened. For a moment, he looked young, like the boy he'd been, who'd died on his brother's sword so long ago. "He did?" he asked.

Elena nodded. "He said he was sorry about all the bad blood there'd been between you, and he wanted me to tell you that you were brothers again, by the end."

Ducking his head, Damon smiled, a small, private smile that Elena had never seen before. And then he wiped that smile from his face, replacing it with his customary brilliant flash of teeth. "Well, I knew that, of course," he said. "Just like Stefan, to show up as a ghost and state the obvious."

Elena took his hand and tugged him toward the couch, coaxing him to sit beside her. "I guess I should have known what he told me, too."

Damon went very still. "What did he tell you?"

Running her fingers across the back of his hand, tracing the long bones of his fingers, Elena said slowly, "He told me that, if what I wanted was... you... if I loved you... he'd be happy for me."

Damon was staring very hard at the opposite wall, his dark eyes unreadable. "And is it?" he asked, sounding almost indifferent. "Am I what you want?"

"Oh, Damon, you know I've always loved you," Elena said, her voice

breaking. “Even when I wasn’t supposed to.”

Damon turned to her then, a new light dawning in his eyes, his mask of indifference breaking and letting hope shine through. Elena leaned toward him, sorrow and joy mixing together inside her, and their lips met.

His kiss was as soft as silk, but somehow demanding, too, and Elena opened to it. Between them, their bond flooded with emotion: love and joy, a sweet thrill of acceptance at last.

Yes, she thought, the joy conquering the sorrow just as, outside, the sun broke over the horizon. *Yes. This is my future.*

[#TVD12DelenaForever](#)



“But the Eiffel Tower closes at eleven, it says so right on the sign,” Elena objected, laughing. “If you didn’t compel anyone, how did you get us up here so late?”

“As well as being incredibly charming and handsome, I am also extremely wealthy,” Damon told her dryly. “Any human could have spread a few euros around. You said you wanted to come up here.”

“I’m not complaining,” Elena told him. She leaned against the railing of the observation deck, taking in the lights of Paris below them. Damon grinned at her.

“I was here in Paris when it was being built for the Exposition Universelle, you know,” he said. “Hideous. Completely ruined the skyline. A bunch of artists drew up a petition against it. They called the Tower a useless monstrosity, and a truly tragic street lamp.”

“Oh, you’re just teasing me,” Elena said, swatting at him.

“It’s true,” Damon said. “They said it in French, of course. *Ce lampadaire véritablement tragique.*”

Elena snorted and turned back to gaze over the city. Damon leaned beside her.

“It is rather pretty up here, of course,” he said. “It’s one of the few spots in Paris from which you can’t see the Eiffel Tower.”

Despite herself, Elena giggled, and Damon laughed along with her. The golden lights of the city below reflected in her lapis lazuli blue eyes. She was so eager to take everything in, to get all the pleasure Paris had to give her.

Damon looked out over the skyline. His eyes caught on the Arc de Triomphe. Elena would probably like to see that up close, too. He was going to show her the whole world.

A jarring wave of pain came through their bond and Damon flinched. Beside him, Elena suddenly gagged and doubled over.

“Are you all right?” Damon asked, steadying her.

Elena shook her head, her face paper-white. She was clutching her stomach, her arms tightly wrapped around herself. The pain, which Damon had instinctively dampened, was still flowing through the bond. Elena was in *agony*.

“Sit down,” Damon said, guiding her to a bench. Elena started gasping for breath. *Doctor*, he thought. *Hospitals. Appendicitis?* It would be faster to take her in his arms and run than to call an ambulance. Everything was in sharp focus, his mind speeding. “We need to get you down,” he said, keeping his voice calm.

From behind them came the sound of a quiet step, and Damon whipped around. He had been sure they were alone.

The step belonged to a blonde woman, or something that chose to look like a woman. She was neatly dressed in a navy blue suit and perfectly coiffed. Her face was stern and, as she met Damon’s eyes, her own were cold. The Guardian who had bound them together. Mylea.

Something in him hardened into suspicion and then into certainty. He lunged for her, but his hand stopped, suspended in air, a few inches from her.

Her voice was as cold as ice. “Damon Salvatore,” she said formally. “We find you in violation of your oath. As you murdered Henrik Goetsch, also called Jack Daltry, in Zurich, Elena Gilbert’s life is now forfeit.”

Elena made a choking sound, and Damon grabbed her hand. “Wait,” he said, as Mylea began to turn away. The Guardian stopped and looked at him. “Jack was a *vampire*,” he said. “He wasn’t a human. He wasn’t covered by my oath.”

Mylea gave a click of her tongue, as if irritated by some minor error. “Henrik Goetsch chose to turn himself into a monstrosity. He was a human who imitated the traits of a vampire, but he never died. His human life did not end until *you* murdered him.”

Elena choked again, her free hand pawing at her throat. Her nose began to bleed, a thin red trickle.

“No,” Damon said, his voice raising frantically. “He was a vampire. We didn’t know...”

Mylea arched an eyebrow. “There are no loopholes in the law of the Guardians.” And with that, she turned on her heel, took one step forward and

was gone, blinked into nothingness.

Elena moaned and slid off the bench, onto the ground. Dropping to his knees beside her, Damon pulled her close. The blood was flowing faster, smearing across her lips and chin.

“It’s all right, princess,” Damon said, stroking her hair, trying to ease Elena’s suffering. “I won’t let them have you. We’ll do whatever it takes.”


His mind began to buzz with rage. He wasn’t going to let Elena die, not because of him. No matter what he had to do, he was going to save her.

[#TVD12DisasterStrikes](#)

About the Author



L. J. Smith has written a number of bestselling books and series for young adults, including *The Vampire Diaries* (now a hit TV show), *The Secret Circle*, *The Forbidden Game*, *Night World*, and the *New York Times* #1 bestselling *Dark Visions*. She is happiest sitting by a crackling fire in a cabin in Point Reyes, California, or walking the beaches that surround that area. She loves to hear from readers and hopes they will visit her updated website at www.ljanesmith.net.



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BESTSELLING AUTHOR

L. J.
Smith

WRITTEN BY AUBREY CLARK

The
Vampire
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THE SALVATION

VOL. 3

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The
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Diaries

THE SALVATION

VOL. 3

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47NORTH

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The Vampire Diaries

A Note About the Hashtags in This Book

Elena's diary may be private, but this book doesn't have to be.

Everyone's talking about the biggest shockers, twists, and swoon-worthy moments.

Look for the hashtags throughout this book and share your own reactions on Twitter. To connect with other readers right now, tag your tweets with [#TVD13](#).



“I’m going to plant the herb garden right there,” Bonnie told Zander, gazing out across their new yard. Green grass spread out in front of her, running right to the edge of a winding country road. There was a little space, half in sun and half in shade, that would be perfect for growing herbs for her spells and charms. Beyond the road rose white-topped mountains—*real* mountains, much higher than the rolling hills of Virginia.

Behind her, Zander wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked his chin against her shoulder. Bonnie leaned back comfortably against his warm bulk. Taking a deep, satisfied breath of the crisp Colorado air, she told him, “It’s absolutely gorgeous here.”

They’d only been here for a few days, and each morning when Bonnie opened her eyes, she was startled by her own happiness. She’d moved here because she couldn’t bear to lose Zander, but she had never considered that she might actually like it.

Even on the plane flying here, she’d had an anxious pit in her stomach. Bonnie had never lived so far away from her family before, never spent more than a few months some place where she couldn’t drive to her mom or one of her sisters if she needed them. And she’d always had her *other* sisters, the ones she’d chosen, Elena and Meredith, by her side.

Bonnie had felt like a traitor leaving Elena and Meredith. They’d assured her that they understood and reminded her she was only a phone call away. But that didn’t relieve Bonnie’s guilt. Stefan, Elena’s true love, had *died*. Meredith had been turned into a vampire. Surely it was *wrong* for Bonnie to abandon them, especially now.

But being here felt *right*. The Colorado sky stretched bright and blue overhead, so clear and deep that Bonnie almost thought she could hold her arms above her head and fly straight up into its limitless space.

There was something about that endless sky, something about the open country and nature all around her that made Bonnie feel like she was bursting

with Power.

“I’m getting stronger every day,” she said, twining her fingers with Zander’s and pulling his arms tighter around her.

“*Mhmm*,” Zander agreed, kissing her neck softly. “This place is really alive. Jared told me he ran for miles last night in the mountains as a wolf, and there was nothing to avoid, no cars or towns in his way. Pretty cool.”

He tugged her around by the hand, and Bonnie followed him into the house. *Our house. How awesome is that?* she thought. She’d liked their old apartments, she guessed, but this little white ranch house had no neighbors to complain about noise, no landlord laying down rules. It was *theirs*.

“We can do anything we want here,” she told Zander.

He grinned down at her with his slow, devastating smile. “And what is it that you want to do, Miss Bonnie?”

Bonnie’s face widened in a mischievous grin. “Oh, I’ve got a few ideas,” she said lightly, and went up on her tiptoes to kiss him, her eyes fluttering closed.

The same familiar zing that Zander’s kisses always gave her was there, but with something extra: They were *married* now. Till death do us part. He was hers.

She opened her eyes and looked up into Zander’s warm, ocean-blue ones. A thrill of happiness shot through her. Channeling a shred of Zander’s energy into herself, Bonnie concentrated for a moment. Joy shot through her as she felt the essence of her sweet, cheerful husband. In the fireplace, violet and green sparks flew, filling the space with light and color.

“Beautiful,” Zander said. “Like tiny fireworks.”

Bonnie was about to say something cheesy but honest, something like, *That’s how I feel with you all the time—fireworks*. But before she could, her phone rang.

Meredith. Her friend no doubt wanted to know how the honeymoon had been and what Colorado was like. Bonnie answered, still smiling, “Hey! What’s up?”

There was a pause. Then, Meredith’s voice, thin and ragged. “Bonnie?”

“Meredith?” Bonnie stiffened. Her friend sounded *broken*.

“It’s Elena,” Meredith said, almost too quietly for Bonnie to hear. “Can you

come home?”

* * *

Sitting on the edge of Elena’s bed, Damon closed his eyes, just for a moment. He was so tired, a bone-deep exhaustion worse than any he could remember feeling before. He’d sat by Elena’s bedside for hours, her hand in his, silently willing her to keep breathing, and her heart to keep pounding.

Willing Elena to wake up.

And she’d kept breathing, somehow, although each slow, rattling breath seemed like it would be her last. All the way across the Atlantic from Paris, back to her home here in Virginia, she’d kept breathing. He could hear her heart beating, but weakly and irregularly.

But still, she was unconscious. It didn’t matter how hard Damon willed her to wake up. It didn’t matter if he pleaded with Elena herself, or if he pulled out all the half-forgotten prayers of his childhood and begged a god who he was sure had turned away from him long ago.

Nothing Damon did mattered.

Gently, he brushed back a long strand of Elena’s hair from her cheek. The once bright gold was duller now, tangled and matted, and her cheeks were sallow. She looked so close to death that Damon’s heart clenched.

Lifting his hand away from Elena’s face, Damon pressed his fist briefly against his chest. There was a dull empty ache there, where he was used to feeling Elena’s emotions running bright and strong through the bond between them. He hadn’t felt anything from their bond since Elena had fallen unconscious.

“Come as fast as you can,” he heard Meredith say in the living room. On the other end of the phone line, he could hear Bonnie’s distressed voice promising to drop everything, to catch the first plane out. When Meredith finally hung up, there was a moment of pure silence before she gave a tearful sniff.

She was pinning her hopes on the little redbird’s magic, he knew. Damon couldn’t help a traitorous little spark of hope himself—Bonnie was so Powerful now—but, deep inside, he knew that even Bonnie wouldn’t be able to help. The Guardians had made up their minds, and Elena was doomed.

Damon stood and paced across the bedroom to stare out of the open window. Outside, the sun was setting. The bedroom’s walls pressed in around him. He was achingly conscious of Elena, lying silent and still behind him.

Enough. He could sit by her bedside as long as he liked, but he wasn't helping her. Damon was *useless*. He had to get out of here, away from Elena's shallow breaths and the faint, dreadful scent of death that was slowly filling the room.

Damon concentrated and felt his body compact, his bones twisting and hollowing. Shining black feathers sprang from his new form. After a few moments, a sleek black crow spread his wings wide and flew through the window and out into the night.

Angling his wings to catch the evening breeze, Damon turned toward the river. Above him, dark gray clouds gathered, mirroring his emotions.

Without consciously directing his flight, he soon found himself above Stefan's grave on the riverbank. Landing and transforming gracefully back to his natural form, Damon looked around. It had only been a few weeks since they'd buried Stefan, but grass had already grown over the earth where his younger brother lay. As Damon gazed at it, the ache in his chest intensified.

He bent and laid one hand against the ground over Stefan's grave. The earth was dry and crumbled under his fingers. "I'm sorry, little brother," he said. "I failed you. I've failed Elena."

Straightening, he wondered what he was doing. Dead was dead. Stefan couldn't forgive him now, as much as it pained Damon to want him to.

They'd spent so much time hating each other. Damon could admit now that it was his fault. He'd resented his younger brother for a host of reasons, beginning with the fact that their father had loved Stefan best. His hatred had intensified after that dreadful day that they'd killed each other, and through centuries of watching from a distance as Stefan suffered through his vampirism and refrained from killing humans, Damon had grown more and more bitter. Even as a monster, Stefan had been more virtuous than Damon had been as a man, and Damon had loathed him for it.

But by the time Jack came along, Damon didn't hate Stefan anymore. *Jack*. Damon's jaw tightened with hatred, and overhead, thunder rumbled in response.

Jack Daltry had pretended to be a human hunting a vicious, ancient vampire. It had all been a lie: Jack was a scientist who had created a new faster, stronger vampire race, who was on a mission to destroy older vampires. Including Stefan, Katherine, and Damon himself.

Damon hadn't even been on the same continent when Stefan was killed.

He'd come home in time for Stefan's funeral, in time to helplessly witness Elena's devastation. Damon rubbed at his chest with one hand, wincing at the memory of how Elena's pain had resonated through the magical bond between them, drawing him home. That pain was how he had known Stefan was dead. Nothing else could have hurt Elena so much.

Damon and Elena's bond was at the root of what had happened to Elena now. The Guardians had linked them to keep Damon under control. They'd rightly decided that if Damon and Elena were connected, it would prevent Damon from following his worst impulses. They'd spelled it out for him: If he fed on the unwilling, Elena would suffer. If he killed a human, Elena would die.

Fat raindrops were beginning to fall, the light brown earth of the riverbank turning a splotchy brown. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Damon spoke again, staring down at his brother's grave. "I didn't know," he said quietly.

All they had wanted, what had consumed him and Elena both, was vengeance. And they had succeeded. They had tracked Jack down and Damon had killed him, had avenged Stefan's death.

After Jack died, Elena had finally felt at peace about Stefan. She'd turned to Damon, and for the first time they could love each other, without feeling that they were betraying Stefan. Damon knew he didn't deserve her. Whatever soul he'd once had, it had been corrupted long ago. But Elena had wanted him anyway.

They'd had two glorious weeks traveling together, enraptured with each other. Then Elena had collapsed, writhing in pain, and Mylea, the cold-faced Guardian who had bound them, arrived.

Damon had assumed it was safe to kill Jack Daltry because Jack was a vampire. It was humans who were forbidden; monsters were fair game to Damon. He'd been a fool. Jack had made *himself* a vampire, used science to replicate the strength and ferocity of the vampire while getting rid of a vampire's traditional vulnerabilities to wood, fire, sunlight.

He had changed himself through mortal means. He had never died; his human life had never ended. Jack wasn't a real vampire, just an imitation. There wasn't a drop of magic in him. As far as the Guardians were concerned, Damon had broken their bargain. And now was paying the price.

Dying.

Damon had brought her back to Dalcrest. Something in him had made him

sure that she would want to be here, among the people she loved.

They'd battled unkillable monsters, saved the world together. Part of him, maybe foolishly, hoped that, together, they could all help him save her.

But, now that they were here and nothing had changed, he was terrified that they couldn't. Maybe Elena was beyond their reach. Damon shuddered at the thought, hunching his shoulders against the pounding rain.

"Stefan," he whispered, looking at the rain-soaked dirt of his brother's grave, "what can I do?" He had tried forcing his blood down her throat—she wouldn't have wanted it, but better a vampire than *gone*—but when he'd finally succeeded in making her swallow, it had done nothing.

Rage rose in him, and thunder cracked overhead. Damon turned his face up toward the sky, streams of water running through his hair, soaking his clothes. "Mylea!" he shouted, his own voice sounding raw and broken beneath the steady pounding of the storm. "I surrender! Punish me, I don't care. Anything. Just tell me what to do!" He paused and held his breath, listening and watching for some sign that the Guardians were prepared to bargain. He could feel tears running down his face, a little warmer than the raindrops. "Please," he whispered. "Save her."

There was no response, nothing but the sounds of the river and the rain. If the Guardian could hear him, she clearly didn't care.



Meredith smoothed her hand across Elena's forehead. It was cold and clammy, and there were dark circles beneath Elena's eyes, startling against her pale skin. Meredith couldn't pull her eyes away from Elena's sleeping face, hoping against hope that something would happen, that she would suddenly crinkle her face in the half-annoyed way she always did in the mornings.

Stiffening, Meredith stared. Had there been a flicker of motion beneath Elena's closed eyelids?

"Elena?" Meredith said, keeping her voice soft and calm. "Can you hear me?"

There was no response. Of course there wasn't. They'd been trying for days, first Damon in Paris and then, once he'd gotten Elena home, Meredith had tried to wake her every way she could think of.

In all that time, nothing had changed. Elena had lain as still and passive as a mannequin, with only a shallow, steady breathing to show that she still lived.

Damon had said that, before she fell into this coma, Elena had been in terrible pain. Meredith was glad she had missed that, glad that Elena wasn't suffering now. But this—this silent, pale creature—terrified Meredith. It couldn't be Elena. Not clever, quick Elena who had survived so much, who had been closer than a sister to Meredith since they were kids.

Meredith rose from her chair next to the big white bed, unable to bring herself to look at Elena anymore. Instead, she moved around the bedroom, efficiently tidying: books off the nightstand and back onto the shelves, shoes neatly straightened on the closet floor. She kept her eyes fixed on what she was doing. She was not going to think about the still figure in the bed.

Meredith's teeth gave a hollow throb, and she rubbed absently at her gums with one finger. She would need to slip out to the woods soon to feed, but she couldn't leave Elena alone.

Alone. Their ranks were dwindling. Stefan was dead. Elena was *dying*. Alaric, Bonnie, and Matt were all still on their way: Bonnie from her new home, Alaric from an academic conference, Matt from visiting his girlfriend, Jasmine's, parents. Who knew where Damon was? He had disappeared hours ago.

Meredith picked up a thin, silver-patterned scarf and folded it neatly. Elena had been wearing this the last time Meredith had seen her. "I finally know," she'd told Meredith, her face so full of joy it hurt to remember. "Stefan wants me to live. He wants me to be happy. I can love Damon now ... it's okay."

Meredith blinked hard, pushing her tears away. Elena had been wrong. Everything was far from okay.

Clutching the scarf, Meredith jerked open a drawer. As she was about to stuff it inside, her hands faltered at the sight of the maroon book inside. Who would have guessed that poised, grown-up Elena Gilbert kept a high school yearbook in the nightstand next to her bed?

Gingerly, she pulled the book out of the drawer and flipped through its pages. Junior year. Their last real yearbook, the one before everything changed. There had been two yearbooks for senior year. The first, the one from the senior year Meredith remembered, had a memorial page for Elena Gilbert and Sue Carson. The other, for the changed world the Guardians had created, showed nothing but teams, classes, and clubs. Neither felt true now. But there was only one version of their junior year.

Her own face, years younger, smiled up from a picture of Homecoming Court. Elena had been class Princess, of course. Junior dance committee. She, Elena, and Bonnie had quit debate team after about a month, but they were in the picture, grinning like goons. An action shot of Matt on the football field, his face set as he powered past a tackle. It all seemed so *normal*.

She turned to the back, and her own handwriting stood out at her.

Elena,

What can I say? My best friend and sister, you're always there for me. But I'll remember the picnics up at Hot Springs, driving to the fraternity party at UVA, Matt and the guys crashing your birthday sleepover. All the times getting ready for a dance together—you, me, Bonnie, and Caroline—was even better than the dance itself.

Have a super-fabu time in Paris this summer, you lucky girl, and remember this! Only one more year till FREEDOM!!!

XOXO

Meredith

Such an ordinary yearbook message, between two ordinary girls. Before Elena's parents had died. Before the Salvatore brothers had come to Fell's Church, and nothing had ever been ordinary again. Elena and Meredith hadn't gotten that freedom the message promised, the freedom to grow up and be normal, to determine their own destinies. Neither had Bonnie nor Matt, nor had the people they'd fallen in love with as they got older.

Instead, they'd all been dragged under by the supernatural: vampires and werewolves, demons and Guardians. The responsibilities of saving everyone, of standing guard between everyday life and the darkness outside had pulled them all in, held them hostage.

Elena most of all, Meredith thought, and snuck a look back at the bed. Elena's chest moved almost imperceptibly as she breathed, her rattling, slow breaths loud in the quiet room. Elena had never really had a chance, not once she'd fallen for Stefan Salvatore.

The bedroom door creaked open, and Damon came in, silent and graceful. He looked to the bed first, a quick, worried glance, and then leaned against the doorjamb as if he was suddenly too tired to stand. His eyes, red-rimmed, met Meredith's, and she wondered if he'd been crying. Damon might rage or let himself be consumed with bitterness, but he never cried.

But maybe now, at the end of everything, he did.

* * *

Matt parked crookedly, one wheel up on the curb, and bolted out of the car, slamming the door behind him. "I knew this would happen someday," he gritted out, teeth clenched, as he stormed down the sidewalk toward Elena's apartment building. "I knew Stefan and Damon would get her killed."

Jasmine followed more slowly, her golden-brown eyes serious. "Don't say that," she told him, laying a hand on his arm as they waited for the elevator. "Elena's not dead. We can't give up on her."

Matt bit his lip and stayed silent for the elevator ride up to Elena's apartment. The hall was quiet, and he hesitated a moment before knocking heavily on the apartment door.

"Take the worst possible thing you can imagine," he muttered, his voice hoarse with rage, "and that's it, that's the truth. Always." Beside him, Jasmine sucked in a breath and raised a hand to touch him again, just as the door

swung open.

Damon was in the doorway, his pale face pinched, his dark hair messy. He looked more human than Matt had ever seen him. Before anyone could speak, Matt balled up his fist and punched Damon in the face as hard as he could.

Damon's head rocked back slightly and he blinked in surprise, a red mark on his white cheek.

"Didn't think you had it in you," he said with a thin, joyless smile. He touched his cheek lightly, and then let his hand drop, the smile disappearing. "I probably deserved that."

"Yeah, I figured," Matt said, shouldering past him into the apartment.

He stopped in the doorway of Elena's bedroom. His heart sank at the sight of her.

When he was little, there had been an amusement park up on Route 40 that had a fairytale theme to it. Matt's dad used to take him up there on Saturdays sometimes. He hadn't thought of it for years. But now it came rushing back. Silent and still, Elena reminded him of the Sleeping Beauty in the Hall of Fairies. The blonde princess, laid out like a sacrifice, not even a hint of movement. Pale and pretty and never changing.

Matt had always thought she'd looked dead.

Jasmine moved past him into the bedroom and felt Elena's throat for a pulse, then lifted one eyelid to look at her pupils. She bit her lip and looked back toward Matt. He could read the regret in her face.

"The doctors in Paris were baffled," Damon said from behind him. "They'd never seen anything like this. I tried the hospital there before booking a plane home, just in case. But it was useless."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Matt said. His mouth felt too dry, and his words sounded thick to his own ears. "The Guardians wouldn't mess around with any kind of human illness. If they gave this to her, they're the only ones who can fix it. We just need to make them do it."

Even as he said it, a cold rush of hopelessness spread through him. What did *they* have to offer the Guardians? What could possibly entice those clear-eyed, emotionless judges to give back Elena?



“Well, how did you get the Guardians to come when Elena made the original bargain with them?” Meredith asked. “Maybe we can convince them ...” Her voice trailed off, as she clearly tried and failed to imagine the Guardians of the Celestial Court being moved by anything they had to say. They had only listened to Elena because she was valuable to them.

Damon gritted his teeth and tried to keep his temper. They were wasting time, he was sure of it. The Celestial Guardians had no interest in helping them.

“The little Guardian, Andrés, went into a trance and told them Elena was ready to kill me,” he said flatly. “That brought Mylea fast enough. Unfortunately, we’ve got a shortage of Earthly Guardians around here now.”

“They saved you. Funny, isn’t it, how everyone dies except you, Damon?” Matt said, glaring at him with bloodshot eyes. “Andrés. Stefan. And now—” His words broke off, and his mouth closed in a thin, miserable line.

A hot ball of hate burned in Damon’s chest, and he momentarily imagined breaking Matt’s neck. He could easily envision the shocked expression in the boy’s blue eyes, the crisp snap of his spine. Then his shoulders slumped as he let the anger drain out of him. He deserved Matt’s scorn. Everything Matt had said was true. The thing Damon was best at was survival, and now he’d outlived everyone—almost—who’d ever managed, despite everything, to love him. If Elena died, there would be no one.

He didn’t want to think about it.

As footsteps approached the apartment door, he straightened, then rose from his seat. He thought he recognized the quick, light steps pattering down the hall, and the steady, heavier tread that followed. The door opened, and Bonnie burst in.

“We got here as fast as we could,” she said rapidly. “The airport was a zoo, and then the traffic coming down from Richmond was—” She broke off. “Oh, *Meredith*.” She flung herself across the room and into the taller girl’s arms.

They clung to each other for a minute, Bonnie's face buried in Meredith's shoulder, and then she raised her head and held it high, sticking out her chin bravely. "So, I'm gone for a couple of weeks and everything falls apart?" she said. Tears glimmered in her eyes, but her tone was casual, even joking.

Good girl. Damon knew the little redbird would stay brave, even though she was as scared as they all were.

Zander was leaning in the doorway, watching them all patiently. His longish white-blond hair fell over his forehead, and his eyes were solemn.

Letting go of Meredith, Bonnie took a deep breath. "So, what can I do?"

"Well," Meredith said, "we think you're probably our best chance of getting in touch with Mylea or the other Celestial Guardians. If you can go into a trance and reach them, maybe we can convince them to save Elena."

Bonnie grimaced. "I've been trying," she said. "Ever since you called me. But ... nothing. If they can hear me, they're not responding."

"It's not going to work," Damon said, unable to stop himself. Why would the Guardians listen to them? If they were letting this happen to Elena, the Guardians had written her and her Powers off. They'd never had the slightest interest in the rest of them, other than planning to kill Damon himself.

"You have a better idea?" Matt sneered.

"Try to contact Elena instead," Damon said quickly, the idea coming to him as he spoke. "You did it when Klaus had her, and we didn't have anything, not even a body then. Now we've still got Elena, she's just ... We can't reach her." His chest felt uncomfortably tight as he finished the sentence.

Whatever Bonnie heard in his voice, her face softened. "I'll try," she said and made her way to where Elena laid.

The way Elena's hands were folded across her chest was too much like a corpse, and Damon grimaced.

"Oh, *Elena*," Bonnie said, her brown eyes shining with tears. Standing at the bedside, she touched Elena's forehead gently, just for a moment.

The others trailed in after her. Jasmine and Matt stood on the other side of the bed, Matt only glancing at Elena briefly before fixing his gaze on the wall. Jasmine took his hand and squeezed it hard. Zander leaned against the wall, holding a bag of Bonnie's supplies, while Meredith hovered at the foot of the bed, her fingers twisting nervously. Damon stood in the doorway.

Bonnie took Elena's limp hands in hers and shut her eyes, her forehead

crinkling in concentration. Then she opened her eyes again and shook her head, letting go of Elena. "I'm going to need to focus," she said. "Can you guys wait outside?"

Damon stepped farther into the room, crossing his arms across his chest. "I'm staying."

Bonnie sighed. "Is it any use arguing with you about this?" she asked. When Damon stayed silent, she gave him a rueful half smile. "Then I won't bother. But everybody else out. I need quiet."

Matt looked like he wanted to object, but he filed out with the others. As Zander left, he handed the bag he was holding to Bonnie, brushing his fingers against hers as he passed it over.

"Okay," Bonnie said, businesslike, when the others were all gone and the door was closed behind them. "If you want to stay, you have to help." She handed him the bag. "Pull out the purple and blue candles, and put them on the nightstand near her head. They're good for deep healing. I don't know if they'll help, but they can't hurt."

Damon followed her directions. He kept his eyes fixed on the candles as he arranged and lit them.

Once the candles were in place, Bonnie took out a bronze bowl and set it on the padded bench at the foot of Elena's bed. Pulling out an assortment of little bags, she started adding pinches of dried herbs to the bowl. "Anise for dreams," she told Damon absently, and tipped in some limp dry flower petals. "Chrysanthemum petals for healing and protection. Mugwort, that's for psychic powers and traveling. I just have to reach her." She added a splash of oil from a small bottle, then pulled out a silver lighter and, with a flick of her finger, set fire to the small pile of herbs in the bowl. They smoldered slowly, a trickle of black smoke rising up toward the ceiling.

"Since when do you need anything to light a flame, redbird?" Damon asked, and Bonnie tilted her chin in acknowledgment of his point.

"I figure I should save my energy," she said, and dug a thin silver dagger out of the bag. "Cut me a piece of Elena's hair, please."

Damon hesitated before moving back to the head of the bed. Elena's mouth was relaxed, a tiny bit open, and her thick golden lashes brushed her cheekbones. Thin, bluish capillaries ran across her eyelids, and her brow was smooth, untroubled. She looked like a doll or an empty image. As if there were no Elena left in there at all.

Her hair slid silkily across his fingers as he lifted a lock, and he could smell the citrus scent of her shampoo. Cutting through the hair, he winced as he accidentally pulled it tight, but Elena didn't react.

"Okay," Bonnie said, taking the lock of hair from him and dropping it into the bowl. The sickening smell of burning hair filled the room. "Now, cut her arm."

Damon's gaze shot up to meet hers. Bonnie looked at him squarely, her mouth set. "We need her blood," she said.

Of course. It always has to be blood. If anyone ought to know that, it was a vampire. Blood and hair, intimate and primal, would lead Bonnie to Elena if anything would. He lifted Elena's arm, and Bonnie slid the bowl beneath it as Damon used the silver knife to make a thin, shallow scratch on the underside of Elena's forearm. He half hoped for a twitch of pain as he cut, but again, Elena didn't react. A few drops of blood dripped into the bowl before Bonnie pulled it away. There was a soft, sizzling noise.

Damon could smell the richness of Elena's blood, and his canines ached and sharpened in response, but he barely noticed. Taking a tissue from the box by the bed, he pressed it against the spreading red line on Elena's arm for a few moments until the bleeding had stopped.

"Now what?" he began to say, but his voice died as he turned back to Bonnie. A sensation of Power rose and filled the room, making Damon's skin tingle. Bonnie had already slipped into a trance, her eyes wide and blank. Her pupils dilated as she stared down into the flames in the brass bowl.

Her hands rested lightly on the end of Elena's bed. Her breathing slowed and deepened. As Damon watched, Bonnie's eyes flickered, tracking something that only she could see.

Crossing the room, Damon let himself lounge against the windowsill, gazing out. Bonnie could be in a trance for a very long time. Outside the window, it was still pitch-black, although it must be the early hours of the morning by now. He unloosed a questioning tendril of his own Power, searching into the darkness.

There wasn't much out there. The sharp, predatory mind of an owl swooping silently through the sky. A wily fox slipped through the bushes near the apartment building. Farther away, he could sense the quiet consciousness of the humans asleep through the town.

Behind him, Bonnie's mind was questing, gently but determined. He could

feel the others, too, each one's mind churning restlessly as they waited outside the bedroom.

But, even though she was right behind him, lying in that white-draped bed, he could feel nothing of Elena. Damon felt as if something inside him had been ripped apart. His Elena, just one last breath away from leaving him forever.

And then he thought he saw one slender golden eyebrow twitch, just a millimeter.

"Bonnie," he said, his throat constricting. But the little witch, deep in her trance, didn't hear him. He came closer to the bed again, close enough that he could feel the heat of the candles burning all around Elena.

Nothing. She could have been a statue. He sent his Power out desperately, but there was no glimmer of consciousness from her.

He must have imagined it.

Damon crouched down and brought his face closer to Elena's, watching her carefully. Time passed and he stayed still, his gaze intent on Elena's face. He was a predator; he could keep his mind clear and his eyes sharp for hours. But there was nothing.

He couldn't leave here, not while there was still that cruel drop of hope. But if Elena died, then it would be time to take off the ring that had let him walk in sunlight all these years. He could step into the sun and let go at last.

His jaw tightened. He wasn't going to give up yet. After all, Elena had survived so much before this.

Dawn was breaking, sending long swathes of pink and gold across the sky, by the time Bonnie finally stirred. She blinked at Damon, seemingly confused. There were dark shadows under her eyes, and her usually creamy skin looked pale and wan.

"Oh," she said, her voice small. "Oh, Damon." She pressed one slim hand against her mouth, as if holding back her own words.

Damon straightened, feeling as if he were stepping in front of the firing line. Maybe, just maybe, he was wrong. The tiny spark of hope in his chest flickered and began to burn again. "Well?" he asked.

Bonnie's eyes reddened, then overflowed, tears tracking down her cheeks. "I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I can't even begin to tell what's wrong. I couldn't reach her. It was like—like she's already gone."

Damon jerked backward, and Bonnie reached out a trembling hand toward him. “I think,” she sobbed, “I think it might be time to start saying good-bye. Whatever the Celestial Guardians did to her, I don’t think Elena’s coming back.”

“No.” Damon heard his own voice, sharp as a whipcrack, and he strode forward, straight past Bonnie, and flung open the bedroom door. The others were out there, all of them, but he ignored their babble of questions as he shouldered past them. He had a brief impression of Meredith’s face, anxious and strained, before he left the apartment.

He didn’t know where he was going. But there had to be *something* Damon could do, *somewhere* he could go to help Elena. He’d lost everyone. Everyone he’d ever truly cared for was dead. He wasn’t going to say good-bye to Elena—not now, not ever. He wasn’t going to lose her.



“I love you, Damon,” Elena whispered.

He couldn’t hear her. None of them could hear her. Most of the time she couldn’t hear them, either, just enough to get the fleeting impression of tears and whispers and arguments. She couldn’t understand more than a word or two, sometimes just enough to recognize a voice.

She thought she’d heard Damon. But she had to admit there was the possibility she’d imagined it, that she was imagining all the familiar distant voices, just to keep herself company.

She was dying. She must be. There had been that terrible pain, Mylea had appeared, and then Elena had found herself in this place of emptiness.

Elena had hoped for a while that she might find Stefan. She’d seen his ghost, she knew his consciousness still lingered somewhere, but the place she was in now didn’t feel like any kind of spectral realm. She’d given up looking for Stefan when it became clear that there was no one here except Elena.

A soft gray light shone all around her, just enough to illuminate what seemed like a fog. It felt like a fog, too. She was surrounded by a damp chill.

She’d walked for miles, but nothing changed. She might not have believed she was moving at all, except for the ache in her feet. When she stopped and stood still, the fog was just the same.

Elena clenched her fists and glared into the gray nothingness. She wasn’t going to let this happen. She wasn’t going to lie down and die, just because the Celestial Guardians wanted her to.

“Hey!” she shouted. “Hey! I’m still here!” Her words sounded muffled to her own ears, as if she was wrapped in a thick layer of cotton. “Let me out!” she shouted, trying to get louder, fiercer. Somebody had to be in charge here, and she would get their attention and *make* them let her go.

Elena’s stomach jolted nervously. What if no one ever responded? She couldn’t stay here forever. The moment she thought this, finally, something

changed. The fog drew back, and a sunlit road appeared.

Elena recognized the street. If she ignored the banks of gray nothingness on either side, it was the road that led to the house she had grown up in, back in Fell's Church. She recognized a long crack in the asphalt, the short grass growing at the edge of the road. But she hadn't lived there for years, not since that final year of high school. Stefan had bought it for her before he died, but she had been able to bring herself to visit only once.

Elena had a sudden, almost physical longing to walk down the path, to feel the sunlight on her shoulders, smell the summer scent of just-cut grass. As she watched, the sunshine intensified at the far end of the road, glowing so brightly Elena had to squint.

It was pulling her toward it, a steady, warm tug somewhere in the middle of her chest. There was peace down that road, she knew.

No. She stepped back, away from the road. They weren't going to trap her so easily.

"Walk into the light?" she shouted, suddenly furious. "You've got to be kidding!"

The longing only increased. At the end of that road, she was sure, was almost everything she had ever wanted. Stefan, alive again, his leaf-green eyes shining with excitement at seeing her. Her parents, just as young and happy as they'd been when they died. Elena could almost see their welcoming faces, and it made her ache with love and loneliness.

Unwillingly, she raised a foot, ready to step forward, and then forced herself still.

"No," she said, her voice cracking. She swallowed hard and steadied it, then spoke again more firmly. "No. I refuse. I am Elena Gilbert, and I am a Guardian. I still have a part to play in the living world. Send me back."

The road stretched farther in front of her, sunlit and tempting. Grinding her teeth, Elena swung around and turned her back on it.

When she turned, she could see the same formless fog. But now there was a dark shape moving through it. *A person*, Elena realized. Her heart began to pound harder, and her mouth went dry. Was it someone coming in response to her call? For a panicky moment, she imagined a Grim Reaper, silent in black, come to collect her.

But no. As the figure came closer, Elena was able to make out that it was

Mylea, the Celestial Guardian who had been overseeing Elena's life for years. When she finally halted in front of Elena, Mylea looked as serene and unruffled as ever, her golden hair pulled back into a bun, her ice-blue gaze level and cool.

"Elena, you made a bargain," she said firmly. "Damon killed a human, and so you have to die. You agreed to this, years ago."

"That's not fair," Elena said, scowling. She sounded like a child, she realized, and she made an effort to temper her voice so that she sounded more reasonable. "Damon was working under the assumption that Jack Daltry was a vampire, and so he could be killed without breaking our agreement. Jack *was* a vampire. He drank blood, and he had all the strengths of a vampire. He was a monster."

Mylea sighed. "As I've already explained to you, the fact that Jack Daltry chose to use his scientific gifts to mutilate himself did not make him less human." Her face softened, just a fraction. "He might have been a monster, but he was a human one."

"But we didn't *know* that," Elena told her, exasperated.

"You knew that he had never died, that he had never gone through the transformations every vampire suffers through. You knew that he and his creations did not have the flaws that weaken true vampires." Mylea spread her hands. "If anyone should have been able to recognize a true vampire, it would be you and Damon Salvatore."

"Jack was dangerous," Elena snapped. "The Guardians ought to be *thanking* us. I'm supposed to protect people."

Mylea shrugged, a graceful tilt of her shoulders. "You were warned that he was not your concern."

It was true; the Guardians had warned her. But in such a roundabout way that she'd had no idea of the possible consequences of hunting Jack. Fear ran through Elena, and she swallowed hard. This was real. She hadn't quite believed that the Guardians would kill her, but it was true. They would let her die.

"Please," she said impulsively, reaching out for Mylea's arm. "There must be something I can do. Isn't there any way to change this? I've served the Guardians for a long time."

Mylea's expression remained as emotionless as ever, but Elena thought she saw a flash of sympathy deep in her eyes.

“There must be *something*,” Elena said desperately.

Mylea frowned, a tiny crease appearing between her slim eyebrows. “There is one way you can change your future,” she admitted.

“Please,” Elena begged again. “Anything.”

“If you can go back and change the course of things, prove that you and the Salvatore brothers can live without destroying one another or other people, you can have your life back.” Mylea tilted her head a little, watching Elena closely. Obviously, she thought that she had made herself clear.

“What do you mean?” Elena asked, startled. *Destroying one another? They loved one another.*

Mylea shook her head. “You and the Salvatore brothers have been in a dangerous cycle for years. *You* were the one who brought them back together after they’d been apart for centuries, Elena, and their rivalry over you led to everything that’s gone wrong here since then. The destruction of Fell’s Church was a direct effect of your relationship.”

Elena gasped, stricken.

Eyes narrowing, Mylea went on. “The vampire Katherine’s jealousy over both Salvatore brothers’ obsession with you led to the beginnings of death and violence in Fell’s Church. Her death as a result of her actions there led to the vampire Klaus’s attacks on the town. Damon Salvatore’s rage over your choosing his brother over him resulted in the kitsune demons gaining a foothold there and destroying Fell’s Church at last.”

“But the Guardians brought Fell’s Church back,” Elena objected.

“And yet the death continued,” Mylea told her. “The students at Dalcrest College, Klaus’s victims, the Guardian Andrés—all had their roots in the damaged love between the three of you. Everything has consequences, Elena.”

Elena pressed a hand to her forehead, feeling dizzy and sickened. It wasn’t true, was it? She and Damon and Stefan were responsible for all the horror that had surrounded them. “What do you mean ‘go back’?”

“I can send you back to when it all began,” Mylea said. Her eyes, a lighter blue than Elena’s own, held Elena’s gaze. “William Tanner’s death was the first time Damon Salvatore had killed in years, and it was the first link in the chain of violence. If you can prevent it from happening and keep Damon from giving in to the darkness within him, perhaps you can turn the course of

events that will, in the present timeline, eventually kill you all.”

“Damon hadn’t killed for years?” Elena said slowly. She hadn’t known that. Neither had Stefan, she was sure of it.

She’d thought her love had *saved* him. Had saved both Damon and Stefan. *The Guardians twist the truth*, she reminded herself, and swallowed hard, pushing away the tears that prickled at the back of her eyes. She wanted to argue with Mylea, but instead she asked, “You can send me back in time?”

Mylea nodded briskly. “You’ll be back in your old body, in your old life,” she said. “This is an opportunity to relive those days and change things.” Her eyes seemed to soften slightly, and she went on, “Don’t take this challenge lightly, Elena. What you change in the past will affect your future. Once you return, everything will be different. You might not be able to be with either of the Salvatore brothers.”

The gray mist seemed to swirl before Elena’s eyes. She could lose Damon, too? But their love was strong, she reminded herself. Even when she had been determined to only love Stefan, fate had pulled her and Damon together.

“I’ll do it,” she said, trying to feel confident. She didn’t know what she could do, not yet, but she would stop Damon from killing, somehow fix the hatred between the brothers before it could blossom into something that would affect more than the two of them. “But how?”

Mylea’s lips quirked up in an almost tender smile. “Love is a very powerful force,” she said quietly, and raised one hand to press against Elena’s forehead. Elena had a moment to feel the cool strength of that slender hand, and then everything faded to black.



Dear Diary,

I can't believe it.

Here I am in my old home at 5:30 in the morning, just a few hours before my senior year of high school begins.

Again.

I remember this morning vividly, the last morning of my life before I met Stefan Salvatore. The Elena I was then—the one who should be here now—was so lost. I didn't feel like I belonged here, or like I belonged anywhere. I was searching for something that was just out of reach.

My bedroom looks just the way it always did, warm and cozy. My bay window gives me a view onto the quince tree outside. Down the hall are dear Aunt Judith and my darling baby sister, Margaret, who's only four and tucked up tight in bed, not half-grown and miles away.

Everything feels as if I might break it, it's so fragile. This moment has been gone for years.

Elena stopped writing and stared at her last line, shaking her head. Soon, she'd see everyone, everything, unchanged. They'd been so naïve—in a good way—focused on popularity and high school romances, and unaware of the darkness that hovered just outside their pleasant lives. She'd never appreciated what she had then. This time, she'd know to savor those moments of innocence.

But she wasn't just here to revisit her past.

Tapping her pen against the pages of the small book with the blue velvet cover, she thought for a moment, and then bent her head and began writing again.

Stefan is alive here. When I think about being with him, my hands start to shake and I can hardly breathe. Part of me died with him, and now I'm going to see him again. Whatever happens next, at least I'll have that.

If I'm going to save Damon, stop the destruction Mylea outlined, I can't be with Stefan this time. It hurts. It hurts a lot. But if I want Damon to listen to me, I have to be with him, not Stefan. I already know how things turn out if I pursue Stefan now.

I love them both. So much. I always have.

But I've learned my lesson about trying to have them both. If I want them both in my life, things fall apart. They always fall apart, no matter what we do. I have to choose. And, if I can keep Damon from killing Mr. Tanner, maybe I can save us all.

With a click and a buzz, Elena's alarm clock went off. Closing her journal, she got up. Soon, it would be time to go to school. Would she remember enough about who she had been then? She worried that somehow, everyone would see that she was the wrong Elena, in the wrong time.

A hot bath and some coffee, and I'll calm down, she thought. She had time.

After a leisurely bath, she took her time getting dressed. The clothes—all the gorgeous new outfits she'd gotten in Paris—looked outdated to her now, but she still sort of loved them. She remembered what she'd worn on this day, the first day of her senior year. A pale rose top and white linen shorts. She pulled them on again. They made her look tempting, as sweet and refreshing as a raspberry sundae, she thought as she looked critically into the mirror, pulling back her hair with a deep rose ribbon.

"Elena! You're going to be late for school!" Aunt Judith's voice drifted up from below. Glancing in the mirror one last time—her face was a trifle grim, as if she were headed into battle, but that couldn't be helped—Elena grabbed her backpack and headed for the stairs.

Downstairs, Aunt Judith was burning something on the stove, and Margaret was eating cereal at the kitchen table. The sight of them stopped Elena in her tracks for a second. She'd forgotten how little Margaret was then. And Aunt Judith had still been wearing her flyaway hair long.

Elena pushed herself back into motion and kissed Aunt Judith quickly on the cheek. "Good morning," she said lightly. "Sorry, I don't have time for breakfast."

"But, Elena, you can't just go off without eating. You need your protein—"

It was all coming back to her. She felt like an actress, mouthing familiar lines she'd said a hundred times before. "I'll get a doughnut before school," she said, dropping a kiss on the top of Margaret's silky head and turning to go.

"But, Elena—"

"Don't worry, Aunt Judith," Elena said cheerfully. "It'll all be fine." At the front door, she spun to take one last quick look at them. Margaret, still half-asleep, licked her spoon. Aunt Judith, her eyes full of love, gave Elena a small, worried smile.

Elena's heart ached a little. Part of her wanted to go back, forget school and the future, and sit down at the table with them. So much had happened since this moment, and she'd never believed she would be back here like this again. But she couldn't stay. Margaret wiggled her fingers in a wave, and Elena, spurring herself into movement, winked at the little girl as she went through the door.

"Elena," Aunt Judith said. "I really think—"

She closed the door behind her, cutting off Aunt Judith's protests, and stepped out onto the front porch.

And stopped.

The world outside was silent, the street deserted. The tall, pretty Victorian houses seemed to loom above her. Overhead, the sky was milky and opaque, and the air felt oppressively heavy.

It was as if the whole street were holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

Out of the corner of her eye, Elena saw something move. Something was watching her.

She turned and caught sight of a huge black crow, the biggest crow she had ever seen, sitting in the quince tree in her front yard. It was completely still, and its glittering black eyes were fixed on her with an intent, almost human gaze.

Elena bit back a laugh and turned away, letting her eyes slide over the crow as if she hadn't noticed it.

Damon. She had almost forgotten that this was the first time she'd seen him, that he'd watched her—frightened her—as a crow this first morning. There was a glad little bubble of joy rising in her chest, but she suppressed the

urge to call out to him. It wasn't the time, not yet.

Instead, she took a deep breath, hopped off the porch, and strode confidently down the street. Behind her, she heard a harsh croak and the flapping of wings, and she smiled to herself. Damon couldn't stand being ignored. She didn't turn back around.

It was only a few blocks to the high school, and Elena spent the walk reminiscing. There was the coffee shop she and Matt had gone to on their first date junior year; there was the little health food shop where Aunt Judith had insisted on buying her special organic cereal. There was the house of the terrible Kline twins, who Elena had babysat during her sophomore year of school.

In her real life, it hadn't been that long since Elena had been to Fell's Church, but things had changed since she was in high school. Stores had closed and opened, houses were remodeled. This was the way it had been when she'd lived here, the way it was supposed to be.

At the school, a crowd of her friends had gathered in the parking lot, chattering and showing off their new clothes. It was everyone who mattered, plus four or five girls who had hung around them in the hopes of gathering some scraps of popularity.

Elena winced. *Everyone who mattered.* The nasty thought had slotted right into her mind. The Elena who belonged here had thought that.

One by one, her best friends hugged her in welcome. They looked so *young*, Elena thought, her heart aching. They all thought they were so sophisticated, but their seventeen- and eighteen-year-old faces still had childish curves, and their eyes were wide with thinly veiled excitement at the first day of their senior year.

Caroline, her green eyes narrow, laid one cool cheek against Elena's for a second and then stepped back. "Welcome home, Elena," she said dryly. "It must feel like the backwoods for you after Paris."

Her expression was stiff and resentful, and Elena wondered at how she had managed to not notice then how much the other girl hated her.

Elena shrugged and laughed a little, feeling awkward. "Paris was nice, but there's no place like home."

For a moment, she tried to focus in on Caroline, to read her aura, but it was hopeless. Elena wasn't a Guardian here, and so she didn't have those powers anymore. It was a strange, helpless feeling to lose them.

Then Bonnie flung her arms around Elena, her red curls tickling the taller girl's chin, and Elena relaxed.

"Do you like my hair? I think it makes me look taller." Bonnie fluffed up her bangs and smiled.

"Gorgeous," Elena said, laughing. "But maybe not tall."

Once Bonnie let go, Meredith moved forward for a warm hug. Raising one elegant eyebrow, she considered Elena. "Well, your hair is two shades lighter from the sun ... but where's your tan? I thought you were living it up on the French Riviera."

Wait. Elena remembered this. She lifted her own pale hands and said, "You know I never tan."

"Just a minute, that reminds me!" Bonnie grabbed one of Elena's hands. "Guess what I learned from my cousin this summer? Palm reading!"

There were a few groans, and someone laughed. Elena's breath rushed out of her. Of course; she had almost forgotten. This was the first time Bonnie had shown her Power. She'd seen the future in Elena's palm. Slowly, Elena flattened out her hand, opening it to Bonnie's gaze.

"Laugh while you can," Bonnie said serenely, peering into Elena's palm. "My cousin told me I'm psychic."

There was something Elena had said then, the first time this happened, but she couldn't remember exactly what. It didn't matter anyway. What had mattered here was what Bonnie had seen in her hand: Stefan.

"Okay," Bonnie said, frowning as she traced the lines on Elena's palm with one finger. "Now, this is your life line—or is it your heart line?" In the crowd around them, someone snickered. "Quiet. I'm reaching into the void. I see ... I see ..." Bonnie frowned. "I don't get this. It says you have two loves, Elena."

Elena's chest tightened. This wasn't right.

Bonnie touched one end of the line running across the center of Elena's palm. The line forked there, splitting into two lines wrapping around the side of Elena's hand. "See? Your heart line divides into two."

"Greedy," Caroline said, not quite jokingly.

Elena blinked, bewildered. Bonnie should have started talking about Stefan. She was supposed to say he was dark and handsome, and he had been tall once. But instead Bonnie must be seeing something of what had happened

in the time after this, the truths of Elena herself, the one who didn't belong here.

"I can see the two loves," Bonnie went on. "But there's something else here. ..." Her eyes widened, and, with a quick, sudden movement, she dropped Elena's hand as if it had burned her.

"What's wrong?" Elena asked, suddenly frightened. She reached out to her, but Bonnie backed away, tucking her own hands behind her back.

"It's nothing," she said. "Palm reading's silly anyway."

Elena was having trouble catching her breath. Bonnie's Power was incredibly strong, although in this time she didn't know how to use it. If there was something in Elena's future that frightened Bonnie this badly, then Elena should be frightened, too. "Bonnie?" Elena asked anxiously, reaching toward her again. "*Tell* me."

There was something panicked in the smaller girl's face, and she shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. It's a dumb game."

Unsure of what to do, Elena wavered. She couldn't *make* Bonnie tell her anything. But if what Bonnie saw in her palm had changed, maybe it was a clue to how her plan was going to work, how things would turn out differently. It might be important.

But maybe it was just showing all the awful things that had already happened to Elena after this moment—the future that hadn't yet appeared for Elena of the past. The future she was going to change.

Elena swallowed hard. That was it, it must be, she reassured herself. Bonnie was seeing things she didn't understand, frightening things. But it wasn't Elena's future, not now.

"We should head into class," Meredith said, sounding slightly irritated as she glanced at her watch.

They were turning toward the school building when the roar of a finely tuned motor stopped them in their tracks. The group of girls swung around to look.

"Well, now," Caroline said, her green eyes speculative. "Quite a car."

"Quite a Porsche," Meredith corrected dryly.

Elena didn't look; she kept her gaze firmly fixed on the brick façade of the school. But she could hear it, the purring of the sleek black Porsche's engine as its driver searched for a spot, and her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

A new student had arrived, one she'd been waiting for despite herself.
Stefan.



Elena's heart clenched. She *had* to look. She couldn't help herself.

Talking to Stefan, touching Stefan, wasn't an option. But she was going to take this chance to at least see him, a chance she had thought would never come again.

The purr of the engine died, and she heard the car door open before she glanced up.

"Oh my God," Caroline whispered.

"You can say that again," breathed Bonnie.

Oh, *Stefan*.

He was alive. He was *here*. He looked just as he had that last night they'd been together. Elena wanted to run to him and wrap herself around his lean body, run her fingers through his wavy dark hair, kiss the sad curve of his mouth. Sunglasses shielded his face like a mask, but Elena knew Stefan well enough to see through the protection they provided. She could sense the misery that had driven him to enroll in school, had made him try to act like a teenage boy so that he could have some brief human contact.

Everything in her pulled toward him. But if she ran to him, everything would lead straight to where she had come from. Stefan dead, Elena dying, Damon broken.

Elena bit her lip so hard she tasted blood, and stayed where she was.

"Who *is* that masked man?" Meredith asked, and everyone giggled.

"Do you see that jacket?" one of the hangers-on asked. "That's Italian, as in *Roma*."

"How would you know? You've never been farther than Rome, New York, in your life!" her friend answered.

Stefan was heading toward the school, a few rows of cars between him and the group of girls. The rhythm of his steps hitched and paused for just a

moment. Elena felt a jolt. He had caught sight of her, she knew. There was a moment when he just stared from behind his sunglasses, his gaze burning into Elena. What was he seeing, she wondered? Her uncanny resemblance to Katherine, certainly, but Elena couldn't help hoping there was more to it than that. Even this early, could Stefan sense something more in her than the looks of his lost love?

After a moment, Stefan began to walk again, continuing smoothly on. Elena stared after him, feeling raw and exposed.

"Uh-oh," another hanger-on said, a touch of envy in her voice. "Elena's got that look again. The hunting look."

"New Boy had better be careful."

Elena pulled herself together and slapped on an expression of disdain. Tossing her head, she began to walk toward the school. "Hardly," she said. "I've got big plans for this year. And they don't include some random boy, no matter how nice his car is."

The other girls crowded behind her in a close-knit pack.

"What kind of plans?"

"Surely you can fit in Mr. Cute-Dark-and-Mysterious."

Without replying, Elena led them through the front door of the school. A long corridor stretched before them, and Stefan's lean figure was disappearing through the office doorway just ahead. Some of the other girls were already drifting toward the office window, eagerly craning their necks. "Nice rear view," someone said, giggling. Caroline was with them, but she wasn't looking through the window at Stefan. Instead, she was watching Elena speculatively.

Deliberately, Elena avoided her gaze. "Do you have my schedule?" she asked Meredith.

"Sure," Meredith said after a pause, handing it to her. Elena remembered that her friend had picked it up for her when Elena had skipped orientation. "We've got trig on the second floor in five minutes."

A few of the girls who had been watching Stefan had turned away from the windows now, discouraged by Elena's lack of interest. *Good*, Elena thought. She couldn't have him, she knew, but somehow she didn't want anyone else going after him.

"Let's go," she said to Meredith.

Meredith and Bonnie exchanged a look, and Meredith followed Elena upstairs. Just as they reached the classroom, Meredith laid a cool hand on Elena's arm, stopping her.

"Did something happen in France?" she asked quietly.

Elena frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Meredith said slowly, her calm gray eyes scanning over Elena. "You just seem different, that's all. Distracted."

A semi-hysterical giggle rose up in Elena's chest—*Well, you see, Meredith, I've been sent back from the future to stop one of the vampires I'm in love with from killing someone, or I'll die*—and she choked it back and smiled at Meredith instead. "I'm fine."

All through trig, Elena shut out the teacher's droning voice, taking the textbook that was handed to her without glancing at it. She knew for a *fact* that she was never again going to use trigonometry. Tapping her fingers idly against her desk, she tried to plan instead.

She needed to meet Damon. But how? The first time they'd met, it had been partly because she looked like Katherine, but *mostly* because she was with Stefan, and the Damon she'd met then would be damned if he let his baby brother have her. But she couldn't wrap herself around Stefan and wait for Damon to come.

If Damon accepted that he was the one she wanted, if she could get him to love her now the way he would in the future, she could keep him from killing anyone. He wouldn't be so angry. He wouldn't be ready to strike out.

"Can anyone tell me what the sine function is?" the teacher asked, breaking in on Elena's thoughts. Mrs. Halpern's eyes swept over the class, and Elena instinctively hunched a little, avoiding the teacher's gaze.

Meredith began to answer the question. She was so beautiful, Elena thought, with her olive skin and heavy black lashes. More than that, Meredith looked happy. And *human*.

She'd had troubles in her life at this point already, Elena knew. A vampire had attacked her grandfather, stolen her brother. But this confident high school Meredith was barely aware of the horrors in her family's past. She was already moving on.

Here, in this classroom, Elena could see exactly how miserable Meredith was in the future Elena had come from. Elena had known, of course, that

Meredith hated being a vampire. But Elena hadn't seen this contentment in years.

Elena sighed and thoughtfully curled a long, silky strand of hair around her finger. Could she fix Meredith, too, if she could keep Damon from killing Mr. Tanner? The road that had led to Meredith's transformation was a long and twisting one, but it had started here. If Meredith was kept clear of the supernatural, if she never suspected the dangers beginning to descend on Fell's Church, maybe she would leave. Go to an Ivy League college as she'd planned, have a successful, human life.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. Stefan was in none of her early classes, thank God, although she knew she'd see him in history that afternoon. She couldn't stop herself from looking for him in the halls. She didn't see him, but she had a constant, exultant awareness that he was here—and *alive*.

She tried to make plans, but she was constantly distracted. Everyone wanted Elena's attention: Boys flirted with her; girls curried her favor with scraps of gossip. She had forgotten what it was like to be the queen of school. Matt was in one of her morning classes, and she met his smile with quiet panic. She didn't know what to do with Matt yet. Her friend was going to have to get his heart broken ... again.

By lunchtime, she was sick of acting like she cared about the popularity, and she slipped down toward the cafeteria alone. Caroline was outside, posed casually against a wall in a model's slouch. The two boys she was talking to nudged each other as Elena came toward them.

Elena wanted to just walk on by. She remembered *this*, too, and all the awful things Caroline had done later. She had plotted to destroy Elena, for no reason, out of jealousy and pure spite.

But Caroline's chin was tilted up, and her eyes staring deliberately past Elena, as if the other girl was beneath her notice. Every line of her body broadcast pure hostility. Her hatred would only increase. If Elena didn't deal with her now, it was bound to be worse later.

"Hi," Elena said briefly to the boys. To Caroline she asked, "Want to get lunch?"

Caroline barely glanced at Elena as she pushed her glossy auburn hair back. "What, at the *royal table*?" she asked scathingly.

Elena suppressed an urge to roll her eyes and instead forced a smile. "Please come," she said gently. "I want to hear about your summer. I missed

you.” It was true, sort of. She’d known Caroline since kindergarten; they’d been good friends until this moment. Maybe she could change things here, too. Maybe this was a chance to fix everything she regretted.

Elena kept going into the cafeteria, not giving Caroline a chance to snap back an answer. Caroline followed but, a few steps in, her fingers fastened hard on Elena’s arm. “A lot of things changed while you were gone this summer, Elena,” she hissed warningly. “And just maybe your time on the throne is running out.”

“You’d make a better queen than I do. Take it,” Elena said agreeably, scanning the crowd as Caroline stood dumfounded. “Are you getting hot lunch?” It was a relief to see Meredith and Bonnie already sitting at their table. Caroline, temporarily silenced, followed as Elena got her lunch and went to join them.

“That new boy is in my biology class,” Bonnie announced. “I sit right across from him. And his name is Stefan—Stefan Salvatore—and he’s from Italy. He’s boarding with old Mrs. Flowers on the edge of town. He picked up your books when you dropped them, didn’t he, Caroline? Did he say anything?”

“Not much,” said Caroline shortly. She was still watching Elena from the corner of her eyes, her forehead slightly creased.

“There he is,” Meredith said, looking across the lunchroom.

Elena’s head shot up. There Stefan was, hesitating at the door of the cafeteria, and then crossing it with long, smooth strides, heading for the hall that led toward the other side of the school. He wouldn’t eat, of course. He had probably fed on the blood of a bird or small animal before school.

Stefan glanced toward their table, and Elena felt his eyes slide over her as viscerally as if he’d touched her. And then he passed by, his jaw tight. Elena swallowed and looked away.

Caroline was still watching him. She had the slightest hint of a smirk on her lovely face.

Caroline wanted Stefan, Elena knew. A few days after this, they’d started hanging out during lunch, had gone to Homecoming together. And then Elena and Stefan had come together, and he’d forgotten Caroline completely. No wonder she’d hated Elena more and more.

On an impulse, Elena nudged her. “You should talk to him,” she said.

It was the last thing she wanted, really. But Caroline's fury over Elena taking Stefan had led to so much horror. And if Stefan was out of the way, in Caroline's orbit, it would be easier for Elena to focus on Damon.

Besides, Stefan would never love Caroline. He'd be perfectly safe with her.

Caroline flicked a glance at Elena. "Who says I want to talk to him?" she said coolly.

But a moment later, Caroline was staring at the door Stefan had gone through. Elena took a long drink of her water. She'd set something in motion.

It might be necessary, but that didn't mean she had to like it.



“Aunt Judith wants me home right after school today,” Elena lied. “I have to hear all about Margaret’s first day of nursery school, I guess.” She was leaning against her locker, Matt looking down at her with his honest blue eyes. They ignored the people streaming past, all eager to get home now that the first day was over.

“I can give you a ride home at least,” Matt said, reaching for her hand.

“That’s okay, I want to walk,” Elena said, gently disentangling her fingers from his. “I’ve got some thinking to do. And you’ve got to get ready for practice, don’t you?” She kissed him gently on the cheek, like a sister might instead of a girlfriend, and walked away.

Matt didn’t object, but Elena could feel his puzzled gaze following her all the way down the hall toward the school doors.

Poor Matt, she thought, sighing. They’d been good friends for so long. Junior year, she’d hoped that he was the boy for her. The one who could be more to her than a trophy or an accessory. And he had been in so many ways—but she hadn’t been in love with him, and she hadn’t been able to see then how much he loved her.

It had taken Matt a long time to get over her the first time. Maybe that was something else she could fix while she was back here, Elena thought, resisting the urge to turn around and look at him again. If she handled their breakup better ...

She pushed through the front doors of the school and set off. Crossing the parking lot, she tilted her face up toward the warmth of the late afternoon sun and hesitated for a moment.

Her biggest problem right now was how to approach Damon in the right way. If she was going to get him to fall in love with her before Halloween, she had better get started.

Tucking a stray hair back behind her ear, Elena turned down the sidewalk toward home and began to go over her first memories of him, ignoring the

chatter of the other students leaving school all around her. He'd come to her in the school gymnasium once, while she and her friends were planning the Haunted House, but that was after she knew Stefan. She didn't know if Damon would have come after her at school if not for Stefan. It wasn't really Damon's kind of place.

She'd met him at Alaric's house at the party Alaric had thrown looking for evidence of vampires. But Alaric wasn't here, wouldn't be here if she accomplished her mission, because he had come after Mr. Tanner was murdered.

She'd sat through history class today, watched as Mr. Tanner mocked Bonnie for her lack of knowledge of history, as Stefan coolly put him in his place. She was struck by how *young* Mr. Tanner was—about the same age as Elena and her friends were in her real present. He was inexperienced and desperate to keep the attention and respect of a class of kids only a few years younger than he was. But despite all that, he'd known a lot about the Renaissance and spoken well about it. Maybe in a few years, he'd be a good teacher. If he lived.

With renewed purpose, Elena walked faster, thinking hard. Damon had come to Bonnie's house. But that was when he was looking for Elena, after she'd already gotten his attention.

A caw came overhead. Elena stopped short and craned her head back to catch a glimpse of a fat black crow in the maple tree overhead. It wasn't Damon, she saw immediately. This bird was plumper, smaller. Probably just a bird, she told herself as it cawed again and then spread its wings and flew off, low, past the house behind her.

But the sight prompted the memory of a dark shape winging its way up from the oak trees at the edge of the cemetery, when she had gone there to visit her parents, before she had known Damon. He'd been keeping an eye on her, hadn't he?

Elena stopped dead. *The cemetery.*

The horrors of her senior year hadn't begun with Mr. Tanner's death on Halloween. They'd begun *today*—when Stefan had fed from an old vagrant sheltering under Wickery Bridge. And it had happened because Stefan had watched Elena in the cemetery, then been caught by a wave of angry Power, leaving him dazed and ravenous.

Katherine's Power, which she had unleashed after witnessing Stefan's interest in Elena, driving Elena out of the churchyard.

The man hadn't died, but his injuries had been the first sign to the people of Fell's Church that danger lurked in their idyllic little town.

Hesitantly, Elena took a few steps toward home. If she didn't go to her parents' graves, the attack wouldn't happen. The old man would be fine, the townwide panic wouldn't begin.

And yet ... Elena stopped again and rocked back on her heels, thinking.

She hadn't been talking to Stefan, hadn't shown any interest in him this time. He wouldn't be following her, would he? And the graveyard would be a good place to try to find Damon. That was the most important thing.

A cloud passed over the sun, and Elena felt a little colder, a little sadder. It had been a long time since she had visited her parents. Now that she lived a few hours away, she hardly ever made it back to Fell's Church. She could see them now, she thought longingly. The cemetery would be isolated and peaceful after her long day. She could be alone there, and Damon would be more likely to come to her when she was alone. Making up her mind, Elena hitched her backpack higher on her shoulders, and headed toward the cemetery, her steps sounding loud and firm in her own ears.

It was a fairly long walk, almost to the edge of town. Coming close to Wickery Bridge, another rusty caw grabbed her attention. Wings spread wide, the huge crow glided to land on the bridge's parapet. Turning its head, it fixed one bright eye on Elena. It seemed to be waiting.

Elena smiled. *Challenge accepted, Damon.*

She had expected to be a little shaky crossing Wickery Bridge, the place where Katherine had pursued her, and Elena had driven off this bridge and drowned. She could still remember the horrible rending sound as the hood of Matt's car had smashed through the old bridge's side. She could almost feel how icy-cold the water had been as she struggled.

But with Damon here, she could be brave.

"Hello, bird," she said casually. The crow stayed very still, its shining dark gaze fixed on Elena. She glanced up at the blue sky, and back at the crow. Then, slowly and deliberately, holding the crow's gaze, Elena smiled, a smile full of secrets. And then she walked on, straight past him, her head high. The bird watched as she passed.

As she entered the cemetery, Elena's gaze fell on the ruined church, and she felt a tremor of foreboding deep inside her. Katherine was down there in the dark passages of the crypts already, watching them all.

At the thought of Katherine, Elena's hands automatically clenched into fists, anxiety running through her. Katherine had been furious when Stefan and Elena had fallen in love, and had attacked them both, had gone after the whole town. It had been the beginning of everything terrible.

Elena's fingernails bit into her palms. How would Katherine feel when Elena went after Damon? Katherine considered both the Salvatores her property, Elena knew, but she had always thought the vampire girl was more possessive of Stefan. She'd even offered to let him live, if he left Damon and Elena to die. But Elena couldn't let herself forget that Katherine was a threat, whichever Salvatore brother Elena pursued.

Crossing past the old church, Elena lifted her chin defiantly. She'd have to solve the Katherine problem when she got to it.

Reaching the newer, well-kept part of the cemetery, Elena rested a hand on the big marble headstone with GILBERT carved into the front.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad," she whispered. "I'm sorry it's been such a long time."

She missed them so much, not as sharply or painfully as when she'd been in high school the first time, but with a powerfully wistful longing. If her beautiful, artistic mother had lived, she could have guided Elena through those first rocky days of being an Earthly Guardian. If her funny, warm father had been there, she could have leaned on him through all the hard times. They would have liked Stefan, she thought, and they would have seen how Damon's stubborn, fiery nature complemented Elena's own.

She wished that she could have gone even further back, that the Guardians had sent her back to Fell's Church when she was twelve. She could have saved her parents. She could have kept them out of the car that terrible day that had ended their lives and changed hers and Margaret's forever.

With a powerful rush of longing, Elena remembered her mother laughing as she chased her through the house when Elena had been very small, catching her and sweeping her up into her arms for a hug.

"I still miss you," she whispered, brushing her hand across her parents' names.

A sudden wind caught her hair, whipping it across her face. Looking up, Elena saw the tops of the oak trees at the edge of the cemetery tossing violently. Dark clouds were massing above her, and there was a sharp chill in the air. She shivered.

The sky grew darker still. This wasn't a natural storm, surely. It had been

clear and sunny only a moment before.

Damon? He could change the weather when he wanted to. Or Katherine? She was far more powerful than Damon right now.

Elena shuddered. If it was Katherine, she might kill Elena without even thinking about it. She remembered how easily Katherine had torn Damon's chest apart with her long talonlike nails, as her fangs ripped through his throat. There had been so much blood.

Elena steeled herself. Running wouldn't make any difference; she knew that this time. She'd tried that, and Katherine had caught up with her eventually. Again, she remembered the cold of the water under Wickery Bridge and shivered.

"I'm not afraid," she said stubbornly. "Whatever's out there, I'm ready for you."

The wind stopped. Everything grew still, the leaves hanging motionless from the trees. All around Elena was silence, without even the chirp of a bird or the sound of a car in the distance.

Something stirred in the shadows under the oak trees. Elena squinted, trying to see. A dark figure moved toward her. The dim sunlight caught pale skin and sleek, night-dark hair. Black boots, black jeans, black shirt, black leather jacket. An arrogant lift to his chin, as if he'd seen everything in the world and didn't think much of it. Damon.

Thunder crashed overhead and Elena, despite herself, jumped.

"Nervous?" Damon was smiling faintly, his dark eyes amused. He was so beautiful, she thought absently. That was always true, always had been true. Sculpted cheekbones and clean, fine features. But there was something unfamiliar in that smile. There was none of the affection, none of the tenderness she was used to.

Elena reached for the bond between them automatically, wanting to check on Damon's thoughts and emotions, and to reaffirm their constant connection. But there was nothing. The Guardian's bond didn't exist here.

Damon moved closer, his eyes fixed on her face. "There's a storm coming," he said, his voice low and intimate, as if he was telling her a secret. The thunder grumbled again. "A bad day for a walk."

Elena felt her own smile rise to meet his challenging one. "I'm not afraid of a little rain," she said.

“No, I imagine you’re not afraid of much.” Damon lifted a hand to brush Elena’s cheek, tracing a finger lightly down her throat. He was far too close, and something twisted uneasily inside Elena.

This was Damon. She had no reason to fear him. Damon *loved* her.

Only ... not this Damon. Not yet. This Damon was a hunter, and he was looking at Elena as if she were prey. Despite herself, she stepped backward.

His eyes narrowed and his smile spread. Elena jutted her chin out stubbornly. She was not going to flinch away from Damon. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Someone could be watching you,” Damon went on, moving closer still. “A young girl, alone in a graveyard, when night is beginning to fall.” His voice was soothing, hypnotic almost, and he moved toward her once more, so close that she could feel his breath on her skin.

Elena’s chest ached. This wasn’t her Damon, this Damon with the cruel set to his mouth and the malicious gleam in his eyes. He was dangerous, even to her.

But, after all, he *was* Damon, wasn’t he? He didn’t know her, not yet, but Elena knew *him*, inside and out. She felt a smile blossoming on her own face and her shoulders, which had lifted as if she was expecting a blow, dropped.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I know you’d never hurt me.”

Damon frowned and took a step back away from her. He hesitated for a split second, then opened his mouth to speak.

“Elena?” Startled, Elena turned to see Bonnie and Meredith approaching from the other end of the graveyard. “Elena?” Bonnie called again.

A light breeze broke the stillness of the air, lifting Elena’s hair. The sun came out from behind the dark clouds, and a mockingbird sang an insistent trill from a nearby tree. A cool finger brushed across the nape of Elena’s neck. She gasped and whipped back around, but Damon was gone. The green grass over the graves behind her was as smooth and empty as if he had never been there.

“Elena,” Bonnie said as they reached Elena, “sometimes I *worry* about you. I really do.”

“Was somebody here?” Meredith said, confusion on her face. “I thought ...” Had Damon Influenced them to forget him? Elena wondered. Or had he simply moved so quickly they weren’t sure what they had seen?

“It’s just me,” Elena said slowly, her eyes still searching the graveyard. There were no dark figures among the trees. No black bird rose toward the sky. “I didn’t expect you guys to follow me.”

“You can tell us to go away,” Meredith suggested, glancing at the gray stone above Elena’s parents’ graves.

Elena shook her head. “It’s okay,” she said. “I wanted to hang out with you guys anyway.” She sat down in the sun-warmed grass beside the headstone, pulling the others down next to her. The three girls sat quietly for a while, watching the soft white clouds blow across the sky.

Bonnie ran her fingers through Elena’s ponytail, taking the ribbon out and twining it into little braids. The gentle pulls on her hair felt good, and Elena relaxed, leaning back against her friend’s leg.

“So,” Bonnie started, her hands not pausing in their braiding, “are you going to tell us why you’ve been acting so funny today?”

Elena opened her mouth, a denial springing to her lips, and caught Meredith’s knowing gaze.

“I know I said you seemed distracted this morning,” Meredith told her, “but it’s more than that.”

“You’ve been getting the strangest look on your face when you look at people, even us,” Bonnie said thoughtfully, tucking a stray piece of hair into one of Elena’s braids. “Like *we’re* strangers.”

Elena turned at that, her hair slipping through Bonnie’s fingers, and looked at her friend. Bonnie stared back at her, brown eyes wide and a little hurt.

“It’s not like that,” Elena said. But it did feel, a little bit, like they were different people from the ones she knew. Bonnie and Meredith had been through so much with her—they’d even traveled to a different dimension together—but not yet, not *this* Bonnie and Meredith.

If Elena managed to change what happened now, if she could keep Damon from killing Mr. Tanner and setting the future she already knew in motion, would her friendship with Bonnie and Meredith change, too? She ached with sorrow at the idea.

“If something’s wrong, we want to help,” Meredith said softly.

Warmth ran through Elena, soothing away that sorrowful ache, and she reached for her friends’ hands. “I’m fine,” she said, gripping Bonnie’s square, small hand and Meredith’s long cool one. “Only ... everything’s changing,

isn't it? It's our senior year, our last year together."

"Nothing's going to change," Bonnie said uncomfortably. "Nothing important. Just school and stuff."

"Elena's right," Meredith said, turning her hand to thread her fingers through Elena's. "Next year at this time, who knows where we'll all be?"

"You've both been such good friends to me," Elena said in a rush. "When my parents died ... I couldn't have gotten through that bad time without you. I don't want to lose you guys, not ever."

Bonnie sniffed and pulled away from Elena to wipe at her eyes. "Don't make me cry," she said, half laughing. "My mascara will run, and then I'll look like a raccoon."

"Let's swear an oath," Elena said determinedly. "An oath that we'll always be true friends."

They'd sworn a blood oath in this graveyard the first time she'd lived this. Bonnie and Meredith had sworn that they would do anything Elena asked in relation to Stefan. And Elena had sworn not to rest until Stefan belonged to her. Not even if it killed her.

And, well, it had killed her in the end, hadn't it? It had killed both of them. An oath like that—sworn in blood in a graveyard—had true Power.

"Wait a minute," Meredith said, as Elena had known she would. She let go of Elena's hand and unfastened a pin from her blouse, then jabbed it quickly into her thumb. "Bonnie, give me your hand."

"Why?" Bonnie asked, frowning suspiciously at the pin.

"Because I want to marry you," Meredith said sarcastically, and Elena smiled a little. "Why do you think?"

"But—but—Oh, all *right*. Ow!"

"Now you, Elena." Meredith hesitated and then jabbed at Elena's finger, their eyes meeting for a moment. She held out her own thumb, a plump drop of blood swelling on its pad, and Bonnie and Elena pressed their thumbs against hers. Bonnie's eyes were still shining with tears and Meredith looked pale and earnest. Affection for them both swelled inside Elena. These were her *sisters*.

"I swear that I'll always be there for both of you," Meredith said steadily. "I'll be on your side and do everything I can for you, no matter what happens."

“No matter what,” Bonnie said, closing her eyes. “I swear.”

Elena, pressing her thumb hard against the other girls’, ignoring the twinge of pain, said softly, “I swear, I will always be there for you, no matter what.” She felt breathless and expectant. This was sacred.

A gust of cold wind blew through the cemetery, lifting the girls’ hair, and sending a flurry of dry leaves across the ground. Bonnie gasped and pulled back, and they all giggled. A flush of satisfaction filled Elena. Whatever happened, however the world changed now, at least she knew she’d have Bonnie and Meredith.



Elena rested her head in her hands, staring down at the scratched surface of her desk as her classmates settled into their seats for trigonometry class. Ignoring their chatter, she went back over her meeting with Damon in the graveyard the day before. Was there something she should have done differently?

She knew she'd intrigued him. She had seen his pupils widen when he leaned in toward her, his eyes curious and hungry. She'd half expected him to appear at her window that night. But he hadn't.

Although ... that morning she'd heard the caw of a crow and whipped around just too late to see the bird. All the way to school, she'd had the disquieting feeling that she was being watched.

Halloween was coming. The night Damon had killed Mr. Tanner. Shifting uneasily in her seat, Elena remembered how Mr. Tanner's head had flopped lifelessly backward against the altar in the Halloween house of horrors. His throat had been caked with blood. Elena squeezed her eyes shut tight, trying to block out the memories.

Damon had been at the Haunted House that night, and seeing Elena and Stefan together filled him with jealousy and seething resentment. He had lashed out by feeding on Mr. Tanner when Mr. Tanner stuck a dagger into him. Damon had killed him out of surprised rage and pain.

According to Mylea, that was when Damon's fate had been sealed. If Elena didn't manage to change what happened, she would die. Stefan would die. And Elena couldn't imagine the Guardians would let Damon live, not without Elena to rein him in. They would all be doomed.

So far, she'd successfully avoided Stefan. In history class she tried to close her mind off, scowling with concentration as she chanted multiplication tables or dialogue from old movies in her mind—anything to drown out whatever part of her might call to Stefan. He didn't try to talk to her, either. She'd had to pursue him last time; he hadn't wanted to be reminded of Katherine, hadn't

wanted to connect with her.

But Elena could feel him watching her in the halls, as clearly as she could feel Damon watching her on the streets. The other day, she'd glanced at Stefan in class without meaning to and seen his green eyes fixed on her. His gaze had been soft and longing, *hungry*. She wanted to comfort him, but Elena already knew how that would end.

The speaker set high on the classroom wall crackled, jolting Elena out of her thoughts. She half listened to the morning announcements, snapping to attention as the vice principal's voice said, "Senior Homecoming Court nominations have been tallied. This year's nominees for Homecoming Queen are Sue Carson, Caroline Forbes, Elena Gilbert, Bonnie McCullough, and Meredith Sulez. Voting will take place in the cafeteria over the next week. Congratulations to all the nominees."

Elena gripped the edge of her desk, a sudden panic running through her. No. No way.

Homecoming had been when it all began. A dizzying whirl of images rose up in Elena's mind's eye. Herself, determined that Stefan wouldn't turn her down. Leaving the dance in Tyler Smallwood's convertible, the taste of whiskey sharp in her mouth, her hair blowing wildly in the wind as they sped down the highway. The lid of the tomb in the ruined church shifting under her hand. The ripping sound as Tyler tore her dress.

Stefan saving her, taking her in his arms. Her whole world changing.

She couldn't let it happen again.

"Congratulations, girls," Mrs. Halpern said to Meredith and Elena as the speaker clicked off. "There's a meeting for all the Homecoming Court nominees with the faculty sponsors in the office third period."

Elena raised her hand. "Mrs. Halpern," she said. "I don't want to be on the Homecoming Court. Is there something I have to do to drop out of the race?" She heard Meredith's gasp of surprise behind her.

There was a moment of utter silence as everyone contemplated the thought. Elena Gilbert, queen of the school, refusing to compete? She was sure to win, they all knew that.

"Uh, no," Mrs. Halpern said, her forehead crinkled in a puzzled frown. "If you're sure, Elena, I can just let the sponsors know." At Elena's nod, she made a note on her clipboard.

Ignoring the whispers around her, Elena waited out the rest of the period. When the bell rang, she pretended not to see Meredith striding toward her and slipped out the door alone. She would have to figure out some kind of explanation to give Bonnie and Meredith.

Outside, Matt was waiting, a smile stretching across his handsome, all-American face. "Congratulations," he said, pulling her close and kissing her easily, just a sweet press of his lips. "You're a shoo-in for Queen. Tell me what color dress you're wearing, and I'll make sure to get the right kind of corsage." Despite his words, there was a wary look in his eyes, as if he was bracing himself for a blow.

"Oh, Matt," Elena said, feeling stricken. She'd been avoiding him, avoiding this moment, and of course he'd noticed.

Whatever happened, her relationship with Matt was over, and she couldn't keep him hanging on. She needed to let him go, kindly, before she went after Damon.

The smile slipped off Matt's face, and he bowed his head. "I'm guessing you've got something to tell me, huh?"

Elena pulled him aside into a little alcove past the lockers, ignoring the curious looks of students passing by. It wasn't nice—it wasn't fair—to spring this on him here, right in the middle of the school day, but she couldn't string Matt along any longer.

"I *do* love you," she said in a fierce whisper, when they were as private as they could be. "I do."

Matt flinched a little and then gave Elena a smile that was almost a grimace. "I guess that's why you're dumping me, huh? Because I'm just that loveable. I should have realized before." His voice was hoarse and, spontaneously, Elena wrapped her arms around him, pushing her face against the rough fabric of his letterman's jacket.

Unbidden tears rose in her eyes. "Oh, Matt," she said, muffled against his shoulder. "You're my friend. My true friend. Don't love me like this anymore."

Matt sighed and stroked the back of Elena's head, running his strong fingers through her hair. "It's not that easy, Elena. I can't just stop how I feel. But I won't try to hold onto you, not if you don't want me to."

When she lifted her head to look at him, there was devastation on his face, beneath the steady eyes and the crooked grin. How had she not seen this the

first time? She barely remembered this conversation. It had just been a means to an end: getting Matt squared away so that she had an open field to go after Stefan.

A curl of self-disgust twisted inside Elena, and she lowered her head again, wiping her eyes against Matt's shoulder. She'd gone through this part of her life with blinders on. And poor Matt, once he'd gotten over her, his next girlfriend had become a vampire and finally killed herself. All the craziness here—Fell's Church, Dalcrest, all along the ley lines—had ruined so much of Matt's life.

When she pulled back from their hug, Matt was staring at her, his forehead creased with concern. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Elena bit her lip to keep back a hysterical giggle. If she kept up with these mood swings, remembering the future that might not come, everyone was going to think she was having a nervous breakdown. "Listen, Matt," she said, "we're good friends, we really are. I love you so much. But there's nothing for you here. As soon as we're out of school, you should go. Take a football scholarship. You're bound to get one."

He had been offered one, hadn't he? A good one, at some big football school. And he'd turned it down. He'd come to Dalcrest to help them protect the innocent.

Elena thought of Jasmine, with her easy smile and soft eyes, her fiercely loyal heart. "You'll meet the right person for you someday," she told him, trying to make him believe. "She'll be smart and kind, and it'll be so much better than we could have been together."

The smile was gone from Matt's face. "You're the only person I want to be with," he said flatly. His eyes narrowed. "Does this have anything to do with the new guy? He's always watching you."

"Stefan?" Matt had always seen more than she'd given him credit for. Elena met his gaze squarely. "I don't want to date Stefan Salvatore," she said honestly, and after a moment, Matt nodded, his shoulders slumping.

"I guess there doesn't have to be someone else for you to break up with me," he said. "You always know what you want, Elena. And what you don't."

"You're one of my best friends," Elena told him. "I just want the best for you."

Matt shook his head, confused. "You're different since you came back from France," he said. Then the corners of his mouth tilted up in a small, sad smile.

“Maybe the trip was good for you, too.”

* * *

“But if you broke up with Matt, who are you going to go to Homecoming with?” Bonnie asked after school, as they turned down the walk to Bonnie’s house. It was a warm afternoon, and Bonnie had invited Meredith and Elena over to hang out.

“I don’t know,” Elena said. “Does it matter?”

Meredith and Bonnie stared at her with identical expressions of shock.

“Does it—” Bonnie echoed incredulously.

“Elena, is there something *wrong* with you?” Meredith interrupted. “You’re really not acting like yourself.”

Feeling defensive, Elena shrugged. “I guess I just don’t think Homecoming is all that important.”

“That’s what she means when she says you’re not acting like yourself,” Bonnie said tartly, opening the front door.

Yangtze, Bonnie’s family’s fat, elderly Pekingese, greeted them with shrill, yapping barks, trying to wiggle his chubby body out through the open door. Bonnie pushed him back, and he growled and snapped at Elena’s ankle as she went by.

Katherine had killed Yangtze, Elena remembered. Bonnie’s mother had cried off and on for days. The dog was so spoiled, she was the only one who could stand him. But there had been no sign of Katherine in the cemetery the other evening, no wild surge of Power to send the girls running screaming across Wickery Bridge. Maybe if Elena and Stefan didn’t fall in love, none of the terrible things from Elena’s first time around—not even Yangtze’s death—would happen.

Gingerly, Elena reached down and patted the dog’s back, earning another snarl. But wait, she thought, pulling back her hand. If Yangtze didn’t die, wouldn’t the world be different, in ways Elena couldn’t even predict? The dog was the smallest part of all this, but every piece of the world made a difference.

Something terrible might happen, Elena thought, suddenly cold with panic. What if Bonnie tripped over the dog’s small, round body on the stairs and fell, cracked her spine, and wound up in a wheelchair? What if the dog finally managed to push its way out, ran into the road, and caused a fatal car

accident? *Anything could happen.* At the realization, all the breath went out of Elena's body in a sudden gasp, and she clapped her hand over her mouth.

"What is it?" Meredith asked warily, but Elena just shook her head, her mind spinning. Anything could happen. The Guardian had told her that, but she hadn't really thought about it. Elena was changing everyone's lives, and what if she accidentally changed them for the worse? At least in Elena's own reality, Bonnie, Meredith, and Matt were more or less safe.

Not Stefan, though. Stefan had died.

Not Elena, who was dying.

And not Damon. She was the last one he had left. For a long time, Stefan had been the only person in the world Damon gave a damn about. And then Elena had come, and their bond had tethered Damon to her, to humanity. And now, in her reality, Elena was dying and Damon was losing the last bit of that humanity he had left.

In the McCullough's living room, Bonnie's sister Mary was unpinning a nurse's cap from her wavy red hair. "Hey girls," she said, dropping her cap on the table. She looked exhausted, dark circles under her eyes.

"Long shift?" Bonnie asked. Mary worked at the Fell's Church clinic, which was always busy.

Mary sighed and closed her eyes for a second. "We got a pretty bad case in today," she said. "You girls go down to the cemetery sometimes, don't you? Down by the Wickery Bridge?"

"Well, sure," Bonnie said slowly. This wasn't something they talked about. "Elena's parents ..."

"That's what I thought." Mary took a deep breath. "Listen to me, Bonnie. Don't ever, *ever* go out there again. Especially not alone or at night."

"Why?" Bonnie asked, bewildered.

Elena's stomach clenched. It shouldn't have happened. Things had been different this time, down near Wickery Bridge.

"Last night somebody was attacked out there," Mary said. "They found him right under Wickery Bridge."

Meredith and Bonnie stared at her in disbelief, and Elena with a dull, wondering dread. Bonnie clutched Elena's arm, her fingers pinching painfully tight. "Somebody was attacked under the bridge? Who? What happened?"

“I don’t know,” Mary said, shaking her head. “This morning one of the cemetery workers spotted him lying there. He was some homeless person, I guess. He was probably sleeping under the bridge when he was attacked. But he was half-dead when they found him, and he’s still unconscious. He might die.”

Stefan. Elena felt weighed down by guilt. She had thought things had changed. Was Stefan following Elena in this reality, too? Had he been overcome with the need for blood and attacked the homeless man anyway?

Or was it Damon who had attacked the man under the bridge? Damon had been at the cemetery.

Maybe fate wasn’t changeable after all, Elena thought, chilled. Maybe the man had been destined to be terribly hurt that night at the bridge, no matter what.

If so, perhaps her mission was doomed to failure. Maybe she and Stefan and Damon would continue on the same path, no matter how she tried to alter things. It was possible, wasn’t it, that all roads would end with Stefan falling, a false friend’s stake in his heart, with Elena drifting to death in her big white bed? With Damon’s heart breaking, all his steps toward redemption lost?

“His throat was nearly ripped out,” Mary said grimly. “He lost an incredible amount of blood. They thought it might have been an animal at first, but now Dr. Lowen says it was a person. And the police think whoever did it may be hiding in the cemetery.” She looked at each of them, her mouth tight.

“You don’t have to scare us,” Bonnie said, her voice strained. “We get the point, Mary.”

“All right. Good.” Mary rubbed the back of her neck and sighed. “I’ve got to lie down for a while. I didn’t mean to be crabby.” She left the living room, heading for the stairs.

“It could have been one of us.” Meredith said. She bit her lip. “Especially you, Elena. You went there alone.”

“No,” Elena said absently. “It would never have been one of us.” She barely noticed the way the other girls stared at her, shocked by the certainty in her voice.

Elena clenched her fists, her nails biting into the palms of her hands. It couldn’t all be inevitable. There was a way to save Mr. Tanner, a way to keep the town safe from all the havoc Katherine, Damon, and Stefan had, in their

own separate ways, brought down upon it.

She had to find Damon, and soon. Halloween was coming fast, and she would need time with him if he was going to fall in love with her, if she was going to show him there were things more pleasurable than destruction.

Elena needed a plan.



A chilly breeze swept through Elena's hair, and she wrapped her arms around herself for warmth. The sun hadn't set yet, but there was already a pale moon high in the sky, and dark shadows were spreading under the trees.

She'd really thought Damon would have come to her by now. Elena had made excuses to dodge Bonnie and Meredith after school, and headed out to the woods. She had to draw Damon to her again, needed to start building a connection between them. And here, isolated beneath the ancient oak trees, was just where he was likely to appear.

A bird crashed through the top of the tree above her, and Elena looked up with a burst of relief. But it was just a blue jay, not the sleek black crow she was waiting for.

Maybe she should give up on subtlety and just shout Damon's name until he answered her. No, that would only make him suspicious.

If he was nearby, there was one thing that ought to draw him out. Blood.

Elena uncrossed her arms and looked around carefully. A rough gray boulder lay half-buried between two trees with twisted roots growing up around it. That might do. Steeling herself, Elena wandered toward it.

Her toe caught on a root, and Elena tipped forward, eyeing the sharp-edged rock. *About right.* Pretending to lose her balance, she threw herself onto the ground hard.

Her teeth clacked together as she hit the ground more violently than she'd meant to. There was a jolting, blinding pain in her knee. Her palms were stinging, scraped by tree roots. Winded, Elena lay gasping for a moment, fighting back tears of pain. She glanced down at her leg and was relieved to see a trickle of red blood. She didn't want to have to try that again.

"Let me help you." The voice, husky and a little unsure, was so familiar, so loved. But it was the wrong one.

Elena looked up to see Stefan Salvatore standing above her, his hand

extended. His face was shadowed so that she couldn't quite see his expression. Tentatively, she laid her hand in his and let him pull her gently to her feet.

Upright again, she winced a little, and Stefan quickly turned her hands palm-up, carefully brushing away dirt and bits of dry leaves. "Just a scrape," he told her quietly.

"My leg," she said, looking up into his face. Her voice cracked, and she had to swallow hard. He hadn't changed. Of course he never changed; he was a vampire. Elena's heart ached, and for one mad moment, she wanted to forget everything and throw herself into his arms and hold him tightly, weep with joy that he was alive.

"Let me see," Stefan said, letting go of her hands. He didn't look her in the eyes, but instead knelt in the dirt, pulling a white silk handkerchief from his pocket. Unfolding it, he tucked something small—Elena couldn't see what it was—back into his pocket. Gently, he blotted at her knee and then tied the handkerchief around it as a makeshift bandage. "There, that should get you home."

He rose, eyes still averted, and backed away. Impulsively, Elena stepped forward and took hold of his leather-jacketed arm. He was so close, so solid, and *real*. A warm flush of love and relief ran over her. "Thank you," she said. "Stefan—"

Almost faster than her eyes could follow, Stefan pulled away from her, and stepped back, deeper into the shadows of the trees. "I—" he said and stopped, then began again. "You're welcome. You should be careful, though, out here alone. Did you hear about the attack?"

"Yes, I did," Elena said, moving closer to him again, her eyes searching the shadows, trying to make out his face.

"They're saying whoever did it must have been a monster." There was an ugly, harsh note in Stefan's voice. Without the sunglasses, he looked vulnerable and terribly tired.

"I don't believe it," she said firmly.

For a moment, their eyes met. Elena could see a wild flicker of hope rise in Stefan's and then disappear, leaving nothing but grim hopelessness. "Anyone who would do such a thing is a monster," he said.

Elena was almost touching him now. She wanted to run her hands across the chiseled lines of his face, remind herself how smooth his skin was.

His gaze traced over the curve of her neck, she saw, and his lips parted a little. “You look—” he said. “You remind me of someone I used to know.”

Katherine. Elena suppressed a grimace. The Stefan of this time was still guilt-stricken over the role he thought he’d played in Katherine’s death. She wanted to announce the truth: *She’s not dead. Crazy and vicious, but not dead. It’s not your fault.*

But she couldn’t. There was no way she could know that now, or at least no way she could explain. And so, Elena said nothing. Instead, she reached out a hand, slowly, carefully, as if she was taming some wild creature, and finally touched him. Just for a moment, her fingers brushing across the bare skin of his wrist.

She couldn’t have him. But this—a moment of touch—she needed.

It was like a circuit connecting. Warmth flooded through Elena’s body, and she wobbled for a moment, ready to fall into his arms. Stefan became utterly still, his eyes dilated and dark as he stared at her. She thought he was holding his breath. There was a moment when it seemed like time was suspended, like anything could happen.

And then, with an intense jolt of sorrow, Elena pulled away, letting her hand fall limply to her side.

“Here,” Stefan said abruptly, pulling something from his pocket with the sleeve of his shirt. His voice shook, and he was staring at his hands, refusing to meet Elena’s eye. He handed her what looked like a handful of scrappy, skinny weeds, a few with small pale flowers. “Keep these with you for good luck. You can even make herbal tea out of them.”

Elena accepted the flowers, recognizing them as vervain. If she kept it close, it would keep vampires from being able to cloud her mind. But Stefan didn’t know yet that Damon was in town, certainly didn’t know about Katherine. Who was he protecting her from? Then she got it.

Himself, of course. It was just like Stefan, to be thinking of himself as a danger while he did everything he could to protect her.

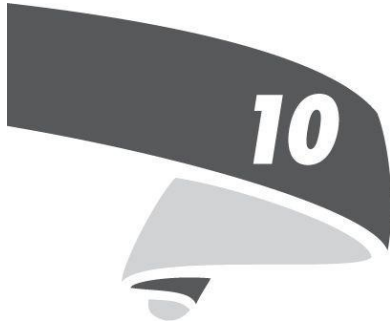
“Thank you,” she said, looking down at the wilting weeds as if they were the most precious thing she’d ever touched.

She stared up at him again, holding her gaze until, reluctantly, he let his eyes meet hers again. “Remember,” she said softly. “I don’t believe in monsters.”

Stefan's face twisted, and he turned and walked away, disappearing into the gathering dusk.

Elena sighed and tucked the vervain into her pocket before heading home. She felt safe, despite the dark. Even if she couldn't see him, Stefan would guard her carefully all the way home.

[#TVD13StelenaReturns](#)



Ninety-seven. Ninety-eight. Elena brushed her hair with smooth, even strokes, watching herself in the elaborately framed Victorian mirror above her dresser. She met her own reflected gaze levelly, her dark blue eyes as steady as her hand on the hairbrush. Her golden hair fanned out like silk across her shoulders.

It was odd, she thought, that she looked almost exactly the same here as she did in her own time. Her friends were younger, softer, but Elena's appearance hadn't changed since she had drunk the Water of Eternal Life and Youth back in her freshman year of college. When she had chosen to be with Stefan forever.

She was *not* going to think about Stefan.

Her hand slowed and her eyes dropped.

There was still that instant fire between them. The rest of the world melted away when she was with Stefan. It had felt so right, so perfect, to talk to him and touch him again.

But it didn't matter. She had to stay away from Stefan. It didn't matter how much she yearned to be with him. She couldn't get caught in that trap. Giving in to her love for Stefan led, in the end, to death and despair. There was a reason she was here.

She put the brush down on top of her rosewood dresser, lining it up neatly between her jewelry box and her comb, and reached into the top shelf of the dresser for a lacy white nightgown. The house was silent. Aunt Judith and Margaret were already fast asleep, but Elena was buzzing with nervous energy. Still, she should try to rest.

Suddenly, there was a rap at the window, a sharp, cracking noise. Elena spun around. Outside, she could just make out a pale face in the darkness, hair and clothes as black as the night around him. *Damon.*

"Let me in." The low, coaxing voice sent a shiver up Elena's spine. She didn't move. "Open the window, Elena. You want to let me inside."

He was trying to *compel* her? A hot flush of anger ran over her. In two quick steps, she crossed the room and flung the window open.

Damon's eyes widened a bit. She knew she wasn't moving in the dreamy way a compelled person usually would, but the corners of his lush mouth tilted, and Elena could tell he'd decided to go with it. "Good," he said, his tone soothing, "Now, invite me in, Princess."

Elena folded her arms in front of her. "I don't know if I should," she said slowly. Her heart was pounding. Gratefully, she thought of the withered vervain in her pocket.

Cocking his head to one side, Damon eyed her thoughtfully. Sitting on a branch of the quince tree outside her window, one arm braced on the windowsill, he somehow managed to look as comfortable and graceful as ever. "You've got vervain," he said.

"I do." Elena didn't offer anything else. If she wanted him intrigued by her, it was probably best to leave a little mystery.

Damon's smile sharpened. "Didn't you say you knew I would never hurt you?"

Elena's mouth went dry, and then she swallowed hard and stepped back from the window. This was *Damon*. She was safe. "Come in, then, Damon," she said.

Damon hesitated for just a moment, uncertainty flickering over his face, and then he was through the window smoothly and standing in front of her. "You know my name," he said warily.

"Yes." She didn't try to explain. What could she say? All the things that might make Damon trust her were still in the future.

Damon moved closer. There was something hot and hungry in his gaze, and she had a sudden urge to raise her hand to cover where her pulse beat.

Elena was glad that she was still dressed in the clothes she'd worn to the woods, not the low-necked nightgown in her hand. It would have felt wrong, would have felt *dangerous*, if he had seen her like that right now, her throat so exposed.

"If you're not afraid, come here," he said coaxingly. "Let me taste you." His irises were so dark that she could hardly make out his pupils.

For *her* Damon, the Damon she loved in her own time, Elena would have swept back her hair and bared her throat in an instant, eager for the sweet

connection that came with the exchange of blood. Even now, she ached for that feeling.

But no, not yet. *This* Damon wasn't ready to share with her as an equal: He just wanted to take.

Instead, she set her jaw firmly and stared back at him. "You *won't* hurt me," she said. "But I'm not ready for that."

Again, Damon hesitated for a moment, his brow wrinkling. "You know my name *and* you have vervain," he said. He took a step closer to her. "Someone's been telling tales about me."

He was very close to her now, near enough that Elena had to tilt her head back to look up at him, exposing the long lines of her throat. The fine hairs rose on the back of her neck, some small, primitive part of her brain recognizing: *predator*. His gaze was unfriendly. But Elena held her ground.

"No one's told me a thing about you," she said honestly. "I'm just a girl who happens to know a thing or two about vampires. And how to protect myself."

"And my name?" Slowly, Damon raised his hand and ran a finger lightly along Elena's jaw. His touch was gentle, but his gaze was cold, and Elena suppressed a shudder.

"I don't mean you any harm, Damon," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "I might know things, but I would never try to hurt you." She could hear the sincerity in her own voice, and she thought Damon could too, because his hand dropped and he cocked his head, looking at her more closely.

"You look like someone I used to know," he said. "But you're not at all like her."

Elena didn't know what to say to that, so she said nothing. Damon smiled.

"So, you're a girl who knows things," he said, a faint mocking tone in his voice. "A girl who hangs out in graveyards at dusk and willingly invites vampires into her boudoir. Are you flirting with the darkness, Princess? Do you want to come with me into the night?"

He reached out for Elena and pulled her against him. His eyes were on her throat again, and his fingers dug into her upper arms.

"That's not what I want at all," Elena said, trying to pull away. Her voice sounded startlingly loud to her own ears, and she realized they had been speaking in hushed voices, almost whispering. Damon's gaze flew from her

throat to meet her eyes.

“You’re wrong,” she said, desperately. His fingers were holding her too tightly. “I don’t want the darkness. I want you to come into the light with me.”

Damon laughed, a sudden burst of laughter, and let her go. The laugh warmed his face, made him look more like *her* Damon, and less like the predator who’d been standing too close to her a moment before.

“What, are you a missionary come to save my soul?” he asked, smiling in what looked like honest delight.

“Maybe.” Elena could feel her cheeks turning pink, but she held her head high. “Things are better in the light. I could show you.”

Damon laughed again, a low, silky chuckle this time, and, before Elena realized what he was doing, he leaned toward her and brushed his cool, dry lips against hers, just for a second. “You’ll see me again, Princess,” he whispered, and then, faster than her eyes could follow, he was gone.

Alone in her bedroom, Elena touched her fingers against her lips, her heart pounding wildly.

He wasn’t her Damon, not at all. Not yet. He didn’t know her, didn’t care for her, and that made him dangerous. For her own safety, she would have to remember that.



“Will you take me to the park tomorrow?” Margaret asked. She gazed at Elena across the kitchen table with wide blue eyes, her unbrushed dandelion-fluff hair sticking up in all directions. Behind her, Aunt Judith poured cereal into bowls.

“Sure, Meggie,” Elena said absently, picking at her toast. Margaret squealed and bounced in her seat. Elena smiled at her sister. They’d go Saturday morning, she decided, just the two of them, before she went dress shopping with Meredith and Bonnie.

Mornings like these were an unexpected blessing of her excursion into the past, Elena thought as she watched Margaret blow bubbles in her milk. She hadn’t known to treasure these mundane, everyday moments the first time alive, because she hadn’t known how quickly they would end. After this year, she’d never live at home with Margaret and Aunt Judith again. In one possible future—the first one, the one she couldn’t help thinking of as the *real* one—Elena would be dead before Christmas.

Aunt Judith set down a glass of orange juice in front of Margaret. “Stop blowing bubbles,” she told her firmly. “And, Elena, much as I like having you here for breakfast, you’re going to be late for school if you don’t get going.”

“Oh,” Elena said, looking up at the clock. She stood and reached for her backpack reluctantly. There was a quiver of nervousness deep in her stomach at the idea of seeing Stefan again. Until yesterday she’d almost forgotten the exact shade of Stefan’s green eyes. Now she thought she might have been better off forgetting when she couldn’t look into those eyes every day.

And then there was Damon. She could connect with him, she was sure of it. Damon would change for her. He *had* changed for her. Without Stefan between them, it would happen faster. She just didn’t know if it could happen in time. Halloween was coming soon, and she’d only managed two brief and enigmatic conversations with Damon.

“I don’t know if I’ll be back for dinner,” she said, dropping a kiss on

Margaret's head. "I might go to Bonnie's house after school. Don't wait for me." Maybe if she went to the cemetery again this evening, Damon would come to her there.

Aunt Judith sighed and handed her an apple. "You hardly had any breakfast. Eat something healthy at lunch."

Elena only nodded. She was thinking of Damon's sharp, brilliant smile, and how quickly it faded. How rough his voice had been when he asked if she wanted to come into the darkness.

She opened the front door, and there, a dark figure against the bright colors of the day, was Damon, as if her thoughts had summoned him. Elena jerked back, her mouth dropping open.

The corners of Damon's mouth tilted up at her surprise. "Hello, Princess," he said lazily, his voice slow and easy. In one hand, he casually held a bouquet of white roses. "Here I am in the light, just like you wanted." He held the roses out to her, his smile mocking.

"Thank you, they're beautiful," Elena said hesitantly.

She stepped back and headed for the kitchen. "You can come in," she said over her shoulder. This was technically a different house than she'd invited him into last night. Her bedroom and the living room were the only remains of the original house, the one that had almost completely burned in the Civil War.

Perhaps, she thought, hearing his soft footsteps behind her, she should have kept him out. But he had never hurt Margaret or Aunt Judith. She had to show that she trusted Damon if she expected him to start trusting her.

In the kitchen, Elena reached into a high cupboard to take out a vase and began to fill it with water.

"Elena?" Aunt Judith asked. "You'll be late—" She stopped in surprise as Damon came through the doorway.

"Look what Damon brought me," Elena said lightly. Damon turned on his most brilliant smile and held out his hand.

"Damon Salvatore," he said, introducing himself. "I'll drive Elena to school today, make sure she gets there on time."

Flustered, Aunt Judith reached up to smooth her hair before taking Damon's hand. "Pleased to meet you," she said, shooting Elena a look that said, as clearly as words, *Who is this? What happened to Matt?*

Elena plopped the flowers into the vase and took a few minutes to arrange them neatly, half listening to Damon and Aunt Judith's conversation behind her.

"At university," Damon was telling Aunt Judith. "I'm just here to visit family. Fell's Church is lovely." His voice was, if anything, a little too polite. And there was a familiar note in it, almost coaxing. Elena's fingers stiffened on the rose stems. Was Damon using his Power on Aunt Judith? Aunt Judith and her fiancé, Robert, had always liked Damon. Was that because Damon had cheated? She hadn't realized he would use his Power so casually. She swung around to stare at him. Damon met her eyes innocently, a bland smile on his lips.

Behind him, Margaret stared at Damon from the kitchen table. "Aunt Judith?" the little girl asked, her voice quavering. Perhaps she could sense Damon's will working on Aunt Judith, compelling her to welcome him here.

"Let's go," Elena told Damon sharply.

"Certainly," he said, still smiling. "You don't want to be late to class." He nodded politely to Aunt Judith.

Elena set the vase of roses down on the table, a little harder than she needed to, and kissed her aunt on the cheek. "See you later."

Damon followed Elena to the front door. "Now that you've got the roses, perhaps you should leave those little flowering weeds in your pocket behind," he said idly.

"Very funny," Elena said, opening the door and turning to look at him. She was aware of the vervain nestled deep in her pocket, but it was interesting that Damon could sense it as well. Or perhaps he was only guessing. "The roses are gorgeous, though," she added, and Damon's lips curved into a smile.

The car parked outside was *amazing*: low, sleek, and clearly very expensive. Damon opened the door for her.

"Are you sure you want to go to school today, Princess?" he asked. "There's a whole wide world out there. You could show me around Fell's Church."

"It's tempting," Elena admitted, and Damon's smile widened. "But I should get to school. Aunt Judith will worry if she hears I cut."

"I could make her forget," Damon suggested, and held up a hand defensively when Elena glared at him. "Just teasing you, Princess. School it

is.”

Elena settled back in the soft leather of the passenger seat, and Damon shut the door behind her and crossed to the driver’s side. She watched as he started the car and pulled out, admiring his strong, graceful hands on the wheel. When he shot her a sidelong smile, she grinned back. This was all so familiar. She knew the way he scanned the road, the way his long legs fit into the footwell of the car. *This is Damon*, she thought, with a sigh of satisfaction. When she was with him, she felt at home.

When they pulled into the parking lot at school, Caroline’s head shot up first. All around her, their friends turned as if drawn by a single, invisible thread. Damon parked and got out, coming around the car to open Elena’s door with a flourish.

“Who is *that*?” She heard Bonnie’s voice rise above the crowd. Meredith shushed her.

She smiled prettily up at Damon as he helped her out of the car, pretending not to notice the spreading whispers all around them.

“They’ll be talking about you all day,” Damon said, his voice low. Elena gave him a small, private grin in reply.

“I’ll see you later?” Elena asked him, squeezing his cool hand in her warmer one.

“Oh, I’ll be around,” he said, and bent his head to press his lips, lightly, against her cheek. Raising her hand to touch where he had kissed, Elena watched as Damon slid back into his car and drove away. A tendril of affection curled warmly inside her.

Once the black car had turned out of the high school parking lot, an excited babble of voices rose up behind Elena.

“Did you *see* that car?”

“There was a car? I was too busy looking at the *guy*.”

“No wonder Elena didn’t care about the new boy.”

Elena smirked a little. Then, turning, she came face to face with Matt. His lips were pursed tightly. Elena flinched. She had told him there wasn’t anyone else.

“Matt,” she said quickly, “it’s not what it looks like. When we talked, I didn’t ...”

Tyler Smallwood and Dick Carter swaggered over. Tyler slapped Matt on the back, his big, red face openly amused. "So someone finally cracked the Ice Princess, huh? Too bad it wasn't you, Honeycutt," he said loudly. "You wasted a lot of time there."

On Tyler's other side, Dick Carter broke into rough laughter. His girlfriend, Vickie Bennett, clung to his arm and giggled uneasily.

Ignoring them, Elena reached out for Matt. "I wasn't seeing Damon yet when we talked," she said. "I wouldn't lie to you."

"It's fine," Matt said shortly, turning away from her and heading for the school doors.

"Matt—" Elena began. She tried to follow him, but Tyler blocked her path, taking a firm hold on her arm.

"Tell you what, gorgeous," he said, baring his large white teeth in a smile. "Forget them both and come to Homecoming with me. We'll show you a good time, won't we, Dick? Vickie?"

Dick laughed, a big dumb har-de-har, and Elena squirmed away, pulling her arm out of Tyler's hot grip. "Forget it," she said briefly, but by the time she pushed past them, Matt was gone.

Tyler had always been a jerk, Elena thought dismissively. And then she felt her own eyes widen as what he had said hit her. Homecoming night.

Elena had been so *angry* that night. Angry at everyone: Stefan for snubbing her; Caroline for bringing Stefan to Homecoming; Bonnie and Meredith for thinking that perhaps she should give up on Stefan. And so she had drunk bourbon with Tyler and Dick and their friends, and gone with them to the cemetery.

Tyler had tried to rape Elena. Stefan had rescued her—that was the one moment that had torn down the barriers between them. *It doesn't matter*, Elena thought, repressing a shudder. That wasn't going to happen this time.

But Tyler and the others would probably still go to the cemetery. And Dick and Vickie had fooled around on Honoria Fell's tomb. The tomb that hid the entrance to the catacombs in which Katherine was concealed. Offended, Katherine had tormented Vickie for months, nearly driving her over the edge of insanity.

Elena glanced back at Vickie, who was now crossing the parking lot toward the school, still arm in arm with Dick. Vickie's pale brown hair flowed down

her back as she tossed back her head to giggle up at Dick, her nose wrinkling as she laughed.

Elena had to try to protect her.

“Elena?” Bonnie’s voice jolted Elena out of her contemplation. She was staring across at Tyler, she realized, frozen. She shook her head quickly, as if to scatter the memories, and turned to her friend.

Meredith was beside Bonnie, looking at Tyler with an expression of disdain. “Don’t let him get to you, Elena,” she said. “He’s a creep.”

“But who was that guy, Elena?” Bonnie demanded, her eyes shining with curiosity. “He was so—and you—Is *he* what you’ve been acting so weird about?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Elena said absently, watching as Vickie twisted a lock of her pale brown hair around one finger.

“Oh, come on!” Bonnie groaned, tugging at Elena’s arm. “A beautiful guy like that? Tell me now!”

“I can’t,” Elena said, pulling away. “I promise I’ll tell you everything I can soon. But right now we have to go to class.” She would have to figure out *something* to tell them. Maybe she could pretend Damon was what he had told Aunt Judith, just a college student who Elena had happened to meet.

Bonnie huffed and rolled her eyes, but Meredith nodded. “Come on, then,” she said. “We’re going to be late.”

Elena followed her friends toward the school doors, but her steps slowed as she saw Stefan waiting just outside, his face as gray as a storm cloud.

“I have to talk to you,” he said, grabbing hold of her arm. Elena stared at him, and he let go, snatching his hand back. “Alone. Please.”

Elena hesitated, and Meredith eyed her carefully. “Do you want us to go ahead without you?” she asked, ignoring Stefan.

“It’s fine,” Elena said with a grateful glance. Meredith nodded and tugged Bonnie after her into the school.

“Wait,” Bonnie was saying, outraged. “I didn’t think she even *knew* Stefan.”

Elena watched her friends walk away before she looked up at Stefan, who had pulled off his sunglasses. His lips were drawn into a tight line.

“Elena,” he said abruptly. “What do you know about that guy who drove

you here?"

She should have realized this would happen. Unthinkingly, Elena raised a hand to touch Stefan, but he flinched back from her. "It's okay," she said steadily. "I know what I'm doing."

"I know you've got no reason to trust me," he told her. His eyes were dark, insisting. "But he's dangerous." He stepped closer, taking hold of her arm again, and his touch sent a hot spark through her.

"He's not dangerous to me," Elena said slowly, holding Stefan's eyes with her own.

"Do you remember me telling you that you reminded me of someone?" Stefan asked her. He was gripping Elena's arm so hard that it ached, and she held her breath. "Well, that girl died. And it was Damon's fault. Damon's and mine. He destroys everything he touches, and he doesn't care. You *have* to stay away from him." Stefan was breathing hard.

If only Elena could take Stefan in her arms and hold onto him, shut out the world so she could do nothing but bring Stefan comfort.

"I'm sorry, Stefan," she whispered, pulling her arm from his grip and brushing past him into the school. She could feel his eyes watching her. Elena didn't look back.



“But where did you even meet him?” Bonnie asked, rifling through a rack of dresses. “Ooh, pink. I think I might do pink for Homecoming this year.” She pulled a fluffy concoction of satin and chiffon off the rack and held it up to herself to admire in the mirror. “Adorable, right?”

“It’s cute,” Elena agreed. “You should try it on.” The three girls had headed right after school to one of their favorite boutiques to look for dresses for Homecoming.

Even as she flipped through the dresses, a little sore place deep in her chest kept reminding Elena that this might be the end. If she wasn’t successful—if she *died*, back in that future—she would never be with her best friends again. And so she wanted, just for one afternoon, to be frivolous and try on dresses and talk about hairstyles.

“Focus, Bonnie,” Meredith said, amused. “I’d like to know where Elena met him, too.”

“At the cemetery, actually,” Elena admitted, and Bonnie gasped, almost dropping the pink dress.

“You went back to the cemetery? Elena, they still haven’t found who attacked that old man. It’s not safe.”

“I haven’t been there since we promised Mary we’d stay away,” Elena said patiently. “I met Damon before that.”

Meredith’s eyes narrowed. “The day we found you there?” At Elena’s nod, she frowned. “So he was hanging out at the cemetery alone the day the old man was attacked?”

“So was I,” Elena said dryly. “Damon has family buried there.” She wasn’t exactly lying, she told herself. Katherine, who had turned Damon into a vampire, was a kind of “family.” And her lurking underground in the crypt could count as being “buried.”

Bonnie rolled her eyes. “I really don’t think Elena’s gorgeous rich new

boyfriend is attacking homeless people in his spare time, Meredith.”

“Even gorgeous rich guys can be psychos,” Meredith pointed out, her voice light.

“That may be true, but Damon’s not one of them,” she said, shortly. She began flipping through the rack of dresses in front of her and hesitated on a long sweep of silver silk. “This would look great on you, Meredith.”

Meredith looked at it critically. “You don’t think it’s too plain? Or too long?”

“You can pull it off.” Elena was sure the color would bring out her cool gray eyes and olive skin, while her natural elegance could carry off the style.

“So, are you bringing this Damon to the dance?” Bonnie asked.

“I don’t think high school dances are really Damon’s thing,” Elena said. She had trouble imagining Damon slow dancing to pop songs and bringing her little cups of punch. And Stefan would be taking Caroline to the dance, she assumed. It was better for the Salvatore brothers not to be in the same room, especially not surrounded by humans.

“Who are you going to go with, then?” Bonnie asked, taking both the short pink dress and a blue green gown in a mermaid style off the rack to try on. “I’m sure Matt would still take you.”

Elena shrugged. “No one, I guess.”

Silently, Meredith and Bonnie turned to stare at Elena.

“What?” she asked, but she knew. The Elena who *belonged* here wouldn’t be caught dead without a date for a school dance. She hadn’t cared about any of those dates, either, not until Stefan.

“Are you actually going crazy?” Bonnie asked tartly, and then gasped as Meredith elbowed her in the side. “I mean, fine, great. Who needs a date anyway?”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Meredith said casually. “I was supposed to go with Ed Goff, but it might be more fun for us three to just go together. Not even bother with boys.” There was something tentative to her gaze, and Elena realized what it was. Meredith was worried about her.

“Are you *both* crazy?” Bonnie asked. “I want to go with a boy. I want to dance all night. I want romance.”

“With Raymond?” Meredith asked, arching an eyebrow. “There’s nothing

wrong with Raymond, but you can't pretend you're all that interested in him."

"I can pretend anything I want," Bonnie said, crossing her arms, the dresses she held crumpling against her.

"Come on, Bonnie," Elena said coaxingly. "If you go with us, you can dance with all the boys. And we'll have more fun together, you know we will."

"It's our last Homecoming together," Meredith said, laying her hand on Bonnie's arm. "It should be the three of us."

"Oh ... oh ... fine," Bonnie said. "But there had better be lots of cute boys who want to dance with me."

"Of course there will be," Meredith said reassuringly, "because you're going to look so great in one of these dresses."

"Obviously," said Bonnie with a suddenly teasing, crooked grin. She stuck her nose into the air and sailed off to the dressing room.

Meredith searched through the racks of dresses efficiently, pulling out a short jewel blue dress to add to the growing pile in her arms. Flicking past a green velvet minidress, Elena wished she could be so enthusiastic. Nothing seemed quite right.

"Here," Meredith said, stopping. "This is perfect for you."

The dress was gorgeous. Silk the color of crystallized violets, which would bring out the gold of her hair and the deep blue of her eyes. Elena would look magical in it, lit from within. *Had* looked magical.

It was what she had worn to the dance, the first time. Tyler had torn this dress. Stefan had fallen in love with her, finally taken her in his arms, while she was wearing it.

Elena stuffed her hands in her pockets, unwilling to touch it.

And then, she saw something on the other side of the room, just waiting for her. Yes. Elena brushed past Meredith and headed straight for it.

The iced-violet concoction was a beautiful dress. But this? This dress was a revelation.

It was red, the deep vibrant crimson of blood, and it would cling to Elena like a glove. Even hanging on the rack, it spoke of passion and intensity. It was a dress to fall in love in, or to stir up hate. If Damon were a dress, this was the one he would be.

“This is it,” Elena breathed.

Meredith’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow. It’s a statement, all right.”

They headed into the dressing room, Meredith with an armload of selections, Elena with only the crimson gown. Pulling it over her head, she called over the wall of the dressing room, “Want to get dressed for the dance at my place?”

“We always do,” Bonnie called back.

It had been a ritual of theirs from their earliest dances in junior high to get dressed together, gossiping and doing one another’s hair. Caroline had always been with them, but Elena didn’t think she was going to join this time.

Elena smoothed the dress down over her hips and admired herself in the mirror. It fit perfectly, and the weight of the material—some kind of satin—made her feel powerful and protected.

“This is it,” she said, stepping out of the fitting room. Meredith and Bonnie came out in dresses of their own.

“Wow,” Bonnie said, looking Elena over. “I wouldn’t have thought red was your color, but you look great. Older.” She was in the mermaid green dress. “I don’t love this one. I’m going to try on the gold.”

Meredith looked sleek and composed in a black-and-gold dress with a long slit up the side, but she frowned. “This itches. Next!”

Elena changed back into her own clothes, draping the red dress carefully over her arm. *Caroline would have liked this dress*, she thought.

“Who’s Caroline going with?” she asked. She couldn’t help it; she had to know if she was going with Stefan again.

“I don’t know,” Meredith said. “She’s been avoiding all of us.”

“She never tells me anything anymore,” Bonnie said. “If it weren’t for math and history, I wouldn’t see her at all.” She sounded forlorn, and Elena had a pang of regret for the lost friendship. Maybe, now that they weren’t competing over Stefan anymore, Caroline and Elena could be friends again, someday.

The fitting room doors opened again, and Elena stepped out to see the next set of dresses. An idea was kindling at the back of her mind. Why not replace Caroline in their little pre-dance group? It would be one way to keep the horrors of her first homecoming night from repeating. She thought of Vickie’s innocent face, the way she had giggled at everything Dick said. How the walls

of her room had been coated with blood in the future Elena had lived through. Things had to be different.

“Why don’t we invite Vickie Bennett?” she said brightly. If Vickie was with them, she wouldn’t leave the dance with Dick and Tyler. She wouldn’t desecrate the tomb, wouldn’t incite Katherine’s anger.

Meredith, dressed in the long silver gown, and Bonnie, in black velvet, stared at her. “You want to invite Vickie Bennett?” Bonnie said slowly.

“Why not?” Elena asked. “What do you have against Vickie?”

Bonnie exchanged a glance with Meredith. Meredith cleared her throat. “Neither of us has a problem with Vickie, but *you*’ve never liked her.”

Nodding, Bonnie added. “You’ve always said she was a useless little drip.”

“Oh.” A little twist of self-disgust curdled inside her. “Well, I was wrong. Let’s bring her along.”

After careful comparisons, Meredith chose the long silver gown, which looked like moonlight on her. Bonnie modeled fourteen different dresses and finally settled on the pink chiffon. Elena, of course, bought the red dress.

Leaving the store, she held her head high, feeling like a warrior. Like a hero. Elena wasn’t *just* going to save Damon and herself. She would save everyone.



The weather Friday evening couldn't have been more perfect for the Homecoming game. Gold and pink from the setting sun striped the sky. On the field, the marching band stepped in precise formation for their pregame show, horns blaring and drums thumping. Cheerleaders cartwheeled in their red and black skirts, warming up the crowd for the game.

"The Homecoming game is a real American tradition," Elena told Damon, leading him up the bleachers. "You owe it to yourself to experience it at least once. I can't believe you've never been."

"You'd be amazed at the number of real American traditions I've been able to avoid," Damon said dryly.

"Well," Elena said, sitting down and wrapping her jacket more closely around her, "I'm glad I get a chance to introduce you to something."

Damon reached out and tucked a lock of Elena's hair behind her ear. "You're going to show me life in the light, right, Princess?" he asked, his voice low and teasing. "Football games and sock hops?"

"I don't think sock hops are a thing anymore, Damon," Elena told him, letting her voice take on a flirtatious edge. The brush of his fingers made her skin tingle. Sensing her reaction, Damon smiled and ran his hand down her arm, wrapping his fingers around hers.

This wasn't *her* Damon, not yet, but he felt so familiar that she kept forgetting. The weight of his arm across her shoulders, the scent of his leather jacket, the cool skin of his wrist resting casually against her neck, the affection that shone through his mocking smile: It all belonged to her Damon, too.

Elena could feel eyes watching them from all around as they sat waiting for the game to begin. Elena Gilbert with a mysterious, shockingly handsome, older man. Gossip would center on this for days.

No one approached them, though. Elena saw Meredith and Bonnie climbing the bleachers, Bonnie's face brightening as she saw them, and sent a

silent plea to Meredith with her eyes. Meredith cocked one elegant eyebrow—message received—and shepherded Bonnie toward a group of laughing girls in another row of seats.

As the team ran out onto the field to claps and cheers, Damon tensed beside her, letting go of Elena's hand. His jaw was tight, and his eyes followed one red-and-black jersey across the field. Stefan.

She was surprised to see Stefan on the team. Perhaps she should have realized that, even without her intercession, Matt would have invited Stefan to try out for the team.

"My appreciation for football is fading," Damon said dryly, his eyes still fixed on Stefan. "Let's go somewhere else, Princess. I can show you all kinds of things better than high school sports." He turned toward her, his lips twitching up in a wicked smile, and took her hand again, starting to rise.

"No, wait, Damon," Elena said quickly, tugging him back down. "I need a favor."

Damon's eyes narrowed. Slowly, he sat back in his seat and fixed her with a steady dark gaze. "So you didn't just want to expand my horizons when you brought me here?" He leaned closer. "You're quite devious, aren't you, Elena?"

Pulling her eyes away from his, Elena looked back at the field. Their team had won the coin flip, and Matt, as quarterback and captain, chose to receive the kickoff. The teams were lining up, and Elena gripped Damon's hand harder as she leaned forward to scan the backs of their jerseys. "See those two guys?" she said, pointing. "Carter and Smallwood."

Damon glanced at them, his face taking on the thoughtful look she associated with him using his Power. "A couple of all-American meatheads," he said dismissively. "Nothing special about them."

"I know," Elena said. "I need them to fight. It has to be bad enough to get them kicked off the team."

Damon's eyebrows rose. "You're more bloodthirsty than I'd realized, Princess," he said.

"I need them to get suspended. They can't be at the dance tomorrow," Elena told him. The kicker was moving back, his teammates lined up on either side. "*Please*, Damon," she said.

Damon leaned back and smiled lazily at her. "Why should I?" His eyes

were locked on hers, challenging her. “What will you give me?”

“Anything you want,” Elena said recklessly. “I trust you. Just do it.”

Damon’s smile widened, and he flicked his eyes back toward the field. The kicker’s foot made contact with the ball, and it flew in a high arc through the air.

With a shout of fury, Tyler Smallwood launched himself across the field and tackled Dick Carter to the ground.

The stands broke out in screaming excitement. Tyler was punching Dick in the stomach, avoiding his pads to reach the flesh beneath. Dick bucked and rolled, and Tyler hit the ground with a thud.

“Good enough?” Damon asked.

Down on the field, the referees were blowing hard on their whistles and running toward the fight. Both boys had pulled off their helmets, and, as Elena watched, Dick punched Tyler hard in the nose. Bright blood gushed out, drops spilling onto the grass of the football field.

“That should do it,” Elena said, feeling a little sick. But this was necessary. If Tyler and Dick went to the dance, if they left the dance and went to the graveyard, terrible things would happen.

This was the better option.

The coaches were shouting as the other players tried unsuccessfully to pull Dick and Tyler apart. Tyler lunged forward and sank his teeth into Dick’s arm. There was more blood, running over Tyler’s mouth. Damon was watching, his face lit with pleasure.

“Damon!” Elena said sharply. “That’s enough!”

“Killjoy,” Damon muttered, but he glared at the fighting boys, and they stilled, then pulled away from each other. Matt and one of the running backs were holding onto them, tugging them farther apart. Both boys looked dazed, and Tyler wiped at his mouth, smearing dark red blood across his face.

A chill spread through Elena. The pleasure Damon took in watching the guys fight was something she hadn’t seen in years. As comfortable as she felt with him, she still needed to be careful.

Down on the field, Stefan was paying no attention to the aftermath of the fight going on all around him. Instead, he was scanning the stands, his eyes narrowed. He must be looking for Damon, Elena realized. Of course Stefan would suspect Damon was behind the fight.

Before Stefan could spot them, the referees called the teams back into place. Two second-string players ran out to take Tyler and Dick's places, and the game began at last.

Elena was surprised at how much she enjoyed it. She had been to football games before, of course she had. But usually, what was going on in the stands had interested her more than what might be happening on the field. Even when she was dating Matt, she hadn't really *watched* him play.

He was really good. Matt and Stefan made an incredible team, but Stefan had the strength, speed, and reflexes of a vampire. Matt was managing on pure skill. Calm and confident, he called the plays, his eyes scanning the field. He ran like the wind, and when he passed the ball downfield, it was in a long spiraling arc that landed safely in Stefan's hands. No wonder he had been—was going to be—offered football scholarships.

Damon watched the crowd far more than he did the game, although his eyes regularly flitted back to Stefan. When he looked at his brother, he wore an expression that Elena couldn't quite decipher. Was this hostile face the one Damon had worn all those centuries, as he kept a distant eye on his little brother, his enemy?

At halftime, Damon bought Elena a cup of hot chocolate.

"Thank you," she said, pleased at his thoughtfulness, and wrapped her fingers around the warmth of the cup. It was getting chilly. Fall had really set in now.

"May I?" Damon asked politely, after he'd watched her take a sip. She handed over the hot chocolate, and he drank slowly, savoring. "Very nice," he said. "Sweet." His fingers lingered on hers for a moment longer than necessary as he passed the cup back to her. Damon's words were innocent enough, but there was something darkly teasing in his gaze. Attraction hummed between them. Maybe he wasn't her Damon yet, but he *would* be.

* * *

When they got back to Elena's house after the game, the driveway was empty.

"Aunt Judith must have taken Margaret somewhere," Elena told Damon.

Damon tipped his head slightly to one side, clearly sending out his Power to search the house. "There's no one home."

"*Mmmhmm.*" Elena unlocked the door and stepped inside. Damon waited on the porch, his hands in his jacket pockets, casual and confident. Elena didn't hesitate. If she wanted Damon to be trustworthy, first she had to trust

him. "You can come in if you want," she said. "The invitation still stands."

"If you want me," Damon said coolly, but there was a pleased tilt to his mouth as he followed her in.

Elena led Damon through the house. In the hall, he paused, running his fingers across the photographs on the side table. "Your mother?" he asked, picking one up to look at it more closely.

Elena nodded, her throat tight. Damon kept touching things as he followed her through the house, brushing his fingers over the furniture and opening drawers to look inside. Up in her room, he prowled like a cat, inspecting the books on Elena's bookcase, rifling through the clothes in her closet, delicately rearranging the objects on her dresser. It was as if he was trying to figure her out.

Finally, he put down her silver comb and turned to look at her. "Why did you want them to fight?" he asked, his voice dry. "It's not for love, is it?"

Elena laughed in spite of herself. "Tyler or Dick? Absolutely not." Sobering, she added, "I know something terrible would have happened tomorrow if they hadn't been suspended. I can't explain any more. I'm sorry."

Damon stepped closer and brought his hands up to frame her face. His eyes, so dark that she couldn't distinguish the iris from the pupil, stared into hers. Electricity shot through her at the careful touch of Damon's hands on her face. He was trying to use his Power to read her, she could tell.

"You're not a witch," he said, confidently. "Or a psychic."

Elena reached up and took his cool hands in hers. "Like I told you, I'm just a girl who knows some things. I'm nothing special."

"I wouldn't say that," Damon said, turning his palm so that his fingers were interlaced with hers. His eyes followed the line of the vein in her neck, all the way down to the collar of her shirt. "You promised me anything I wanted," he said.

He expected her to pull away, to be afraid, Elena knew. Instead, she brushed her hair back, cocking her head to expose the smooth line of her throat. "I trust you," she said simply.

Damon stared for a moment, then pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her, and kissed her throat. Beneath the softness of his lips, his sharp canines pricked her, and she pressed closer still. Yes.

When his teeth slid smoothly beneath her skin, she could feel Damon with

her at last: all his anger and loneliness, that lost child she knew hid beneath his cold façade. And, deeper still, passion. Love that never ended, a burning fire that could never be extinguished.

Their minds intertwined, and Elena stifled a sob of pure joy. Damon was hers again. They were both going to live.

[#TVD13LovingDelena](#)

“They were both amazing,” Bonnie said from the window seat. She was already wearing her fluffy pink dress, her bouncy curls perfectly smooth.

“Who?” Elena murmured as Meredith twisted a long strand of her hair and secured it with a bobby pin.

“Matt and Stefan,” Bonnie said. “When Stefan caught that last pass, I thought I was going to faint. Or throw up.”

“Oh, *please*,” said Meredith.

Vickie Bennett, carefully ringing her eyes with liner in front of the mirror, giggled nervously. She’d been thrilled when Elena invited her to join them in getting ready for the dance, but she seemed hesitant and unsure now that she was there. As Elena watched, Vickie glanced quickly at her, then looked away, her free hand twisting the hem of her dress.

“And Matt—that boy is simply poetry in motion ...” Bonnie wriggled around on the seat to fix a bright eye on Elena. “You could have gotten either of them to take you, you know. Matt’s still crazy about you. And he’s a sweetheart. Plus, I saw Stefan’s face after Damon brought you to school. He practically swallowed his tongue, he was so upset.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Elena said. “I’m with Damon.”

“Then why isn’t he bringing you to the dance?” Meredith asked, her talented fingers twining more of Elena’s hair into an elegant golden mass. “Even if he doesn’t like dances, he should have come if you wanted him to.”

“But I didn’t want him to,” Elena said, laughing and catching Meredith’s hand as she tweaked another strand of Elena’s hair into place. “I wanted to go with you guys.”

Bonnie sat up straighter, her small face growing serious. “I’m glad you did, Elena,” she said. “Remember how I saw in your palm that you had two loves? I think ... I think something bad might happen if you aren’t careful.”

Meredith huffed out an exasperated breath. “Bonnie—”

“I just mean,” Bonnie said, “that if she wants Damon, it doesn’t matter that Matt and Stefan like her. That’s all. Two loves aren’t necessarily better than one. You need to be careful, Elena.”

“And you should leave some guys for the rest of us,” Meredith said lightly. Bonnie laughed and looked away, but Elena shifted uneasily under Meredith’s hands. How much of the future could Bonnie see? And which future was it?

It didn’t matter. Elena knew what would happen tonight. Caroline and Stefan would be at the dance together. Elena would leave them alone this time. She wouldn’t ask Stefan to dance. Caroline, Elena thought, would have a perfectly nice time. There wasn’t going to be a second love for Elena this time. Whatever Bonnie saw, it wasn’t going to happen.

“It’s fun to go with just girls, anyway,” Meredith said. “You were right, Elena.”

“Sure,” Bonnie said, rolling her eyes. “Guys: Who needs them?”

Vickie turned away from the mirror to face them and said, in an awkward rush, “Thanks for inviting me to come with you. I probably wouldn’t have gone at all otherwise.”

“What happened with Dick and Tyler, anyway?” Bonnie asked curiously. “Did Dick tell you what they were fighting about?”

Vickie spread her hands wide, shrugging in amazement. “All Dick is said was that suddenly he was so angry he couldn’t even see straight. The next thing he knew, everybody was pulling him and Tyler apart.”

Meredith frowned. “They don’t take steroids, do they?”

“No! I don’t think so.” Vickie was shaking her head, but a shadow of doubt crept into her voice.

Again, Elena felt a flicker of guilt. She remembered the way Dick’s head had snapped backward when Tyler punched him in the mouth, the dazed expressions on both their faces when the other players had finally pulled them apart.

But worse things would have happened if they had gone to the church that night. Stefan had almost killed Dick and Tyler after Elena drowned. Vickie had been gruesomely murdered. The memory of Vickie’s room, painted in blood, made Elena’s stomach turn over.

What were a few rumors or a suspension to that?

“There,” Meredith slid the last bobby pin into Elena’s hair. “Gorgeous.”

Elena stood and pulled her friends close so that they could all look in the mirror. Bonnie, her curls falling over her shoulders, was as sweet as candy in her shimmering pink taffeta. Meredith's hair was swept up into an elegant chignon, and the long sweep of silver silk falling almost to her feet made her seem a thousand times more sophisticated than she'd ever seemed before. Even Vickie, in a soft green dress that came to her knees and ended in a puff of lace, looked fresh and delicate despite her nervousness.

As for herself, Elena thought, standing straight and tall in the crimson dress, she looked like a burning flame. She looked like she could set the world on fire.

They walked down the stairs together to where Aunt Judith and her fiancé, Robert, waited, along with pajama-clad Margaret. Margaret jumped to her feet and came to hug Elena around the waist. Elena bent down and kissed her little sister on the forehead.

Aunt Judith blinked when she saw Elena. "You girls all look lovely," she said slowly. "That's certainly a ... dramatic dress, dear."

"You're pretty," Margaret said, beaming up at Elena, and Elena gave her a squeeze.

"Runs in the family," she whispered, and her little sister giggled.

Robert was staring at Elena, looking a little dazed.

"What's the matter, Bob?" Aunt Judith asked.

"Oh." He frowned and passed a hand across his forehead. "Actually, it just occurred to me that *Elena* is a form of the name *Helen*. And for some reason I was thinking of Helen of Troy."

"Beautiful and doomed," said Bonnie. Her eyes met Elena's for a second, before she quickly looked away.

"Well, yes," said Robert.

A chill went up Elena's spine. She *wasn't* doomed, she told herself fiercely. Not this time. There was nothing to worry about. "We have to go," she said quickly, and kissed Aunt Judith good-bye. "Don't wait up."

They all rode to the dance together in Meredith's car, Elena in the front passenger seat, Bonnie and Vickie in the back. Meredith and Vickie were laughing and chattering, and Elena tried to join in.

But Bonnie was oddly quiet, and when Elena looked into the backseat, the other girl's brown eyes were fixed on her thoughtfully. Elena couldn't escape

the heavy, anxious feeling that something important, something terrible, was about to happen.

No, she told herself. It's just a high school dance. I'm only afraid because of what happened the first time. Everything is different now. But the thoughts didn't lighten the sickening feeling of dread at the bottom of Elena's stomach.

She almost leaned over and asked Meredith to take her home. She could have given some excuse, said she felt ill—it wouldn't even have been a lie. But she was Elena Gilbert, and she did not back down. She would hold her head high and enjoy this last dance. There was nothing to be afraid of.

* * *

Music spilled out the open doors of the auditorium as they arrived. Inside, the cavernous room was a swirling mass of people, laughter, and voices. The decoration committee had draped the walls in long swathes of sheer fabric that shone gently in the light, transforming the whole auditorium into something from a dream. In the center of everything, resplendent in gold, was Caroline.

"Look at that dress," Bonnie said, softly. "What's the front held on with? Superglue?"

The dazzling dress, made of gold lamé and fitting like a second skin, certainly showed a lot of Caroline. She looked beautiful and wild, her glossy auburn hair streaming down her back as she laughed. Her long limbs were smooth and tanned, and her cat-green eyes shone. Caroline was clearly having a wonderful time.

Elena looked for Stefan beside Caroline, but she couldn't spot him. The crowd around Caroline was constantly shifting. People came up to speak to her briefly, admiringly, like courtiers to a queen, and then stepped back to make room for the next in line.

"Born to rule, apparently," Meredith said, sounding amused.

Elena kept moving toward Caroline, scanning the changing crowd around her. Stefan had to be there somewhere. Elena wouldn't speak to him, wouldn't touch him, but she wanted to see him. She could have that at least, surely?

As a couple of cheerleaders stepped aside, Elena saw Caroline's date at last and stopped short for a second in surprise.

Not Stefan at all. Matt. His hand was resting lightly on Caroline's arm as he stood beside her, prince consort to the queen, but his eyes were fixed on Elena, his jaw set defiantly.

Elena held her head high and started walking toward them again, fixing a smile on her face. She didn't own Matt. She'd prepared herself, she thought, to see Stefan with Caroline. She wasn't ready, though, for the sharp sense of loss at seeing Matt with her instead. Elena hadn't quite realized how much she thought of Matt as *belonging* to her, at least in this time. Beyond her feeling possessive of him, Caroline couldn't possibly be good for Matt.

Vickie had wandered off toward the refreshment table, and Meredith and Bonnie, one after the other, were asked to dance and went off onto the dance floor.

"Hey, Elena. Want to dance?" It was her lab partner, a tall, gangly guy with a wicked sense of humor who normally she'd have enjoyed dancing with. But Elena just shook her head, barely glancing at him.

"Not yet," she said shortly. "I need to talk to somebody. I'll catch up with you later."

As Elena reached the outskirts of the group around her, Caroline looked up and their eyes met. Elena smiled, but Caroline just gazed at her. And then she smiled, and, turning toward Matt, tipped her face up to his and kissed him, a long passionate kiss.

Elena felt her own face drawing into a scowl and consciously smoothed it over, fixing a neutral, almost bored expression in its place.

"Hello, Elena," Caroline drawled, as soon as the kiss ended. "Don't you look"—her eyes flicked over the crimson dress—"nice. It's so original of you to wear that shade of red with your complexion. A lot of people would worry about looking washed out."

Elena forced a smile. "Hello, Caroline. Hello, Matt."

Up on the stage near them, the principal tapped his finger against the microphone, clearing his throat. "Can I get the Homecoming Court up on stage, please? It's time to crown your queen!"

The crowd cheered, but Elena was hardly listening. Instead, she was looking beyond Caroline and Matt. She was positive that Stefan was here, somewhere in the crowd. Even if he hadn't brought Caroline, surely he had come.

The crowd was shifting around her as the princesses, Bonnie and Meredith among them, climbed the steps to the stage. Elena turned her back on them for a minute, scanning the faces behind her for Stefan.

Then strong fingers, their pointed nails digging into her arm, dragged Elena back to attention. Caroline, eyes blazing, leaned in close as Elena pulled away.

“How does it feel, Elena?” she whispered, her voice hard. “How does it feel to know I’ve taken everything you wanted?” Almost stomping her feet, she swung around in a sweep of gold and auburn, and climbed the steps onto the stage, holding her head high.

Elena cocked a cynical eyebrow at Matt. “Caroline Forbes? Really?”

Matt’s cheeks reddened and he looked away. “*You* broke up with *me*, Elena. I’ll date who I want.”

“Oh, Matt,” Elena said, softening. She thought again of Jasmine, of the beautiful, smart, compassionate woman who would fall in love with Matt, who would hold on to him through all the dangers his life threw at them. “I *know* you can do better. Don’t waste yourself on someone who just wants you as a trophy.”

Matt sighed. “At least she wants me.”

The principal had finished introducing each girl. Now he tore open an envelope. “And your new Homecoming Queen is Caroline Forbes!” Around them, the crowd cheered.

Elena squeezed Matt’s hand. “I know you, Matt,” she said in a quick, fierce whisper. “You don’t take the easy route. You’re not going to be happy unless a relationship is real, unless it’s *true*. I’m sorry it’s not going to be with me, but you don’t have to settle. Promise me you’re going to be ready, when that great girl shows up. Don’t waste your time on the wrong people.”

The principal lifted the shiny, plastic crown and placed it carefully on Caroline’s head.

For the first time, Matt looked up and made real eye contact with Elena. There was a little bit of warmth in his eyes now, and his mouth turned up into a half smile. “Yeah, maybe,” he said. “One of these days.”

Caroline’s eyes were shining, and she gripped her plastic scepter as if it were made of pure gold. Elena leaned forward and hugged Matt.

And then, behind Matt, she finally saw Stefan. With a satisfying sense of something slotting into place at last, her eyes locked with his. *This*, she thought, *all this time, I’ve been waiting for this.*

They were in a crowd of people, and his eyes were only on her. Just for

now, couldn't she at least pretend he was hers?



Stefan looked *perfect*. Under the dim auditorium lights, Stefan seemed so poised and handsome, his black blazer somehow better cut, more sophisticated than the other boys'. Elena couldn't make out the color of his eyes, not from this far away, but she knew how green they were, and how, with his sunglasses finally stripped away, they must be broadcasting every emotion he felt.

Elena's chest tightened as raw longing shot through her. She suddenly felt like she was suffocating, the noise and heat of people pressing in around her. She sucked in a desperate gasp of air.

Stefan's eyes were fixed on hers as he began to make his way toward her through the crowd. Elena's heart fluttered in her chest. *No*. She wasn't even allowed to pretend. The connection between her and Stefan could kill them both.

"I have to go," she muttered, and let go of Matt.

"Elena?" Matt called, but she was already turning on her heel and walking away, as fast as she could without actually running. *Stay calm*, she ordered herself, but she was panting, unable to catch her breath. She hit the swinging door hard and found herself out in the brightly lit, almost empty halls of the school.

Elena leaned against the cool metal of the row of lockers across from the door of the auditorium, and closed her eyes for a moment.

She was never going to have Stefan again. All those years together, all they'd been through, and she couldn't even talk to him. All their history, wiped out. If she succeeded, it would never happen.

"Elena?" She knew that voice. Her eyes snapped open.

Stefan stood in front of her, his face soft with concern. "I heard what Caroline said to you," he said. "Are you all right?"

Elena couldn't help laughing, a short, almost-sob of a laugh. "You think

I'm upset about *Caroline*?" she asked. It was so far-off it was as if Stefan didn't know her at all. *Well, he doesn't, not now*, she thought, and the thought cut off her laugh. Sobering, she snapped, "Whatever she thinks, I don't want anything Caroline has."

Stefan touched her cheek, gently drawing her gaze back to his, and a spark of electricity flew beneath Elena's skin at his touch. "I know that," he said. "I know you don't care about all this. Popularity. Dances. I've watched you, Elena, and I can tell you're not thinking about those things. But I also know that you're *sad*."

"Oh." Tears stung the backs of Elena's eyes, and she squeezed them tightly closed again, shaking her head. "Caroline's wrong about—well, almost everything. But, even if I don't want to be queen or date Matt, it's true that I can't have everything I want. And that hurts."

"Maybe ..." Stefan began, but his voice trailed off as Elena shook her head again, her mouth tight. She'd tried having everything, having both of the vampires she loved, more than once. It had taken her years to learn that trying to have both Damon and Stefan led to nothing but misery for all of them. She couldn't start down that road again, no matter how much she wanted to.

Stefan's oak-leaf green eyes were warm with sympathy, and his voice was soft. "I understand, Elena. I can't have the thing I want most either."

Elena couldn't help it. She leaned into his body, just a little, and Stefan's arms circled around her. Elena pressed her face against his shoulder. It was *Stefan*, Stefan who she'd missed so much.

Stefan let her cry, holding her while she shook for a few moments. Swallowing hard, Elena straightened up, her face back under control. Stefan's arms were still around her, as if he didn't want to let go.

"Sorry," she said, sniffing. "You must think I'm a lunatic."

"Not at all," Stefan said. He stroked her back gently, and Elena arched into his touch. "Shall we dance?"

"What?" Elena blinked in surprise. Music was streaming softly through the closed door from the auditorium. Stefan slowly lifted Elena's arms and twined them around his neck, then wrapped his own arms around her waist.

"We can't have what we want," he said with a note of longing in his voice. "But we could dance, just for now. It is a dance, after all."

They began to sway in time to the music, and Elena leaned her head against

the delicate fabric of Stefan's blazer. His strong hands were holding her so tenderly, and she knew that he was looking down at her with painful, aching love shining through his face, now that he knew she couldn't see him.

Stefan was drawn to her, had wanted and needed her from the very beginning. This was one thing Elena knew, one thing that had always been true between them. But he would let her go without a word, for her own good. To keep Elena safe.

Elena was swept up in a great wave of emotion, of love and pity and passion, all mixed together. This was *Stefan*. How could she turn away from him, even for Damon?

Winding her arms around Stefan's neck, his soft brown curls brushing against her fingers, Elena pulled back a little and looked up into his face. His eyes were dilated with passion, the black expanding across the green.

What if Elena's plan didn't work? What if, no matter how she tried, Damon was fated to kill Mr. Tanner Halloween night? Or worse, what if she gave up Stefan, undid their love, for *nothing*?

Elena pulled him closer. Stefan's lips parted in surprise, and then, with an anguished look of surrender, he bent his head to hers. "What are you?" he murmured against her lips. "What is it about you?"

As their lips met, heat rushed through Elena's body. It felt so familiar, so right. Her Stefan. The rest of the world fell away.

Until a door burst open behind them.

"*Elena?*"



Elena pulled out of Stefan's arms in a panic, stumbling backward as she put distance between them. What had she been *thinking*?

"Damon," she said as she turned to face him. Her heart was hammering hard, and she knew her voice sounded strained. "This isn't what it looks like."

Against the deadly pale of his skin, Damon's eyes blazed like black stars. In an instant, his face smoothly fell back into its customary detached irony. If Elena hadn't seen that momentary look of pain, she might have thought that there was a chance he'd listen to what she had to say.

Damon's lips tightened. "Funnily enough, I think it's exactly what it looks like, Elena," he said coolly. "My little brother makes a habit of trespassing on my territory." His eyes shifted, and then he was looking past Elena, as if she didn't matter, straight at Stefan. Stefan glared back, his jaw set stubbornly.

"As for you? I'll make you suffer," Damon told him, his voice cold and clear, ringing through the deserted hallway. "I told you I would kill you one day, and I will, but first I'm going to destroy everything you care about. You'll *beg* for death in the end." He flashed a brilliant, scornful smile with no humor in it at all. Faster than Elena's eye could follow, he was gone.

"*Damon!*" Elena tried to scream after him, but her voice was thin with shock, and it came out more a squeak than anything else.

She'd been such a fool, giving in to her emotions, and now she had ruined *everything*.

Elena forced herself still and took a deep gulp of air. Maybe there was time to salvage this. If she could find Damon, if she could explain ... Elena peered down the hall toward the shadowy corridors leading to the rest of the school. Where would Damon have gone? With a pang, she realized that she didn't know where he was living, had never known that sort of detail about this time in his life.

"Elena." In her moment of panic, she'd almost forgotten about Stefan. He gripped her by the arm, his voice low and urgent. "You need to get out of

here. Find your friends and go somewhere safe, a house where Damon's never been. Take the flowers I gave you. If Damon comes to you, whatever you do, whatever he says, *don't let him in.*"

Elena grabbed hold of Stefan's hand. "I just need to talk to Damon."

"It won't help," he said grimly. "Do what I told you, Elena, please."

And, in the moments between one blink and another, he was gone, too.

Elena swore, slamming her hand against a locker. Stefan was the *last* person who should be going after Damon now, and he ought to know that. But maybe he didn't care.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then another, trying to calm her pounding heart.

Maybe Damon would go to Stefan's boardinghouse, looking for revenge. Or maybe she could figure out where he was staying. Damon liked luxury—she could check the nice hotel downtown and search for upscale, uninhabited houses. Inhabited ones, too. He had hidden her in an attic once, Elena remembered. She let out a long, frustrated sigh.

Damon could be anywhere. But maybe, just maybe ... Elena looked up and down the halls at the banners cheering on the football team, the dented lockers. Damon had never been one to run away from conflict. He could still be in the school.

And if so, Elena needed to find him, fast.

Elena headed back into the auditorium, music and chatter swelling around her as she passed through the door. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness as she scanned the crowd, trying to spot her friends.

She saw Meredith first, on the dance floor with a boy whose name Elena didn't know. Elena cut straight through the crowd toward them, putting her hand on Meredith's shoulder.

"I need your help. Please," she said.

Meredith took one glance at her and nodded. "I'll be back," she said to her partner with a smile, and tugged Elena to the side of the dance floor, whispering, "What? What's happened?"

"Let me get Bonnie and Matt first, and then I'll explain." Elena had spotted Bonnie, deeper in the crowd on the dance floor. She was dancing with Raymond and getting into the music, her eyes closed and her hands up in the air above her head. Elena shouldered her way toward her, ignoring the

grumbles as she shoved past people.

“Bonnie. Come with us.”

Bonnie opened her eyes and scowled. “I’m *dancing*,” she said, without stopping.

“This is important.” Elena tried to put all the anxiety she was feeling into her face.

Bonnie sighed and rolled her eyes at Raymond. “Girl stuff,” she said. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Seriously, what’s going on? It couldn’t wait?” she hissed at Elena as they reached the edge of the dance floor and the crowd thinned out a little.

Over at the refreshment table, Matt was pouring two cups of punch. Elena headed for him, Bonnie and Meredith trailing behind her. “I need help finding Damon,” Elena said. “He’s here, and he saw me kissing Stefan.”

Matt’s eyebrows shot up his forehead, and Bonnie and Meredith exchanged a confused glance.

“You were kissing *Stefan*?” Bonnie asked, in a tone midway between scandalized and intrigued.

“I’m not sure this qualifies as an emergency,” Meredith said dryly. “Maybe you should let him cool off and call him tomorrow.”

Matt remained quiet, not able to look Elena in the eye.

Elena felt sick. Of course they weren’t panicking. As far as the three of them were concerned, Damon was just a guy she was dating, and Stefan was a guy who went to their school. Good-looking, intense, mysterious guys, but, when you came right down to it, only human beings. They didn’t understand how dangerous Damon—*this* Damon, the Damon of now—could be.

“This isn’t going to be okay!” she said, hearing her own voice wobble wildly.

“Oh, Elena—” At her outburst, Bonnie’s eyes widened in sympathy, and she wrapped her arms around Elena. “We’ll help, whatever you need.” She looked fiercely at Meredith and Matt, as if daring them to disagree. Meredith nodded in agreement, but Matt hesitated.

“I just—Caroline’s waiting for me,” he said, gazing down at the two cups of punch he was still clutching.

“Go ahead and take them to her and then come help us,” Meredith said

firmly.

“Caroline will get over it,” Bonnie added, a smirk playing around the edges of her mouth.

Matt looked torn for a moment, and then his face firmed, his mind made up. “I’ll be back,” he said grimly, and marched off.

The three girls watched as he crossed the auditorium to where Caroline stood. At first, she smiled at Matt and accepted the cup of punch gracefully, as poised as a princess. Matt dipped his head to speak in her ear and, as she listened, Caroline’s expression grew more and more thunderous. She snapped something back at him, and Matt replied. Then Caroline, clearly incandescent with rage, reared back and slapped Matt hard across the face.

“Oh my God,” Bonnie breathed.

Matt swung around and hurried back to them. “I guess that’s that” was all he said. There was a red mark high on his cheekbone where Caroline had slapped him.

Elena slipped her hand into his big, warm one and squeezed, just for a second. “Thank you.” She didn’t deserve him; she knew that.

As she let go, Matt looked down at her, shaking his head slightly from side to side. “I don’t know why I do the things I do for you, Elena Gilbert,” he said, but a rueful smile was beginning to tug at the corners of his mouth.

“Someday, I hope to return the favor,” Elena said, then turned to her other friends. “If we split up, we can search the school more quickly.” They pushed through the auditorium doors into the hall again. “But if you see Damon, just come get me, don’t try talking to him. He’s upset. If you see Stefan, try to get him to come back here.”

“So Stefan went after Damon?” Meredith asked, confused. “Why? Do they even know each other?”

“They’re brothers, but they don’t get along very well,” Elena told her.

She dug into the tiny lipstick-red purse she carried. It didn’t hold a lot—just essentials—but one thing in here might be crucial. “Here.” She pulled out the withered bunch of vervain, now looking more like a bunch of wilted, dead weeds than ever, and quickly divided it into four small portions, a few strands of vervain in each.

“Um, why are you giving us dead plants?” Bonnie asked, holding hers doubtfully between her thumb and forefinger, her nose wrinkling.

“They’re good luck,” Elena said, aware of how lame she sounded. “Damon’s very superstitious.”

They all stared at her but, with a shrug, Matt put his bunch into his suit jacket, and Meredith into her clutch. Bonnie, purseless, tucked them behind her ear.

They split up, Matt and Bonnie heading down the hall toward the cafeteria, Meredith and Elena going the other way toward the office. As they walked, Elena glanced into every dim classroom, checking for Damon or Stefan.

“Maybe you should just let Damon calm down on his own,” Meredith said hesitantly, but Elena shook her head.

“I have to find him.” The longer she and Meredith looked, the more urgently Elena felt that time was running out. She knew Damon was only getting angrier by the minute.

Unease spread inside Elena, the feeling that someone was watching her from the shadows. The skin on the back of her neck crawled. She stopped to listen.

In the distance, someone laughed, and quick footsteps ran down a nearby hallway. Probably just another student, someone ducking out of the dance. Elena took a deep breath and pushed open the next classroom door. No one.

“Do you really think—” Meredith began. She broke off as the fire alarm suddenly began to blare, a deafening screech. Despite herself, Elena jumped.

“Some kid always has to set it off and try to ruin everyone’s good time,” Meredith half shouted over the alarm, disgusted.

Elena shook her head. She could smell smoke, faint and faraway for now, but there. “I don’t think so,” she said. In the distance, she could hear frantic shouts, the principal’s voice rising over the loudspeakers, directing everyone out of the building.

It was a real fire, she was sure of it. She was also sure that Damon had started it. Elena looked around wildly, searching for some clue to his whereabouts.

“Over here,” she said, picking a direction and hurrying forward. They hadn’t looked in the theater yet, maybe Damon—or Stefan—was there.

The smoke grew thicker as they made their way deeper into the school. “Elena, stop!” Meredith called, her heels clicking against the floor as she ran after Elena.

“I’m sure he’s down here,” Elena called back. Damon would want to see the chaos he had created. She could picture him, flames reflected in his dark eyes.

Meredith caught up to her, grabbing hold of Elena’s arm with strong fingers. “It’s not safe,” she said. “We have to get out of here.”

Meredith dragged Elena around the corner, but they were faced with a searing wave of heat. Flames licked the ceiling, melting the lockers like they were made of candle wax. Both girls shrieked as the fire crackled and grew.

“I need to find him,” Elena said, sobs beginning to rise in her throat, her eyes stinging from the smoke.

But, as Meredith took began to pull her toward the fire exit, Elena felt suddenly, horrifyingly sure that she was too late. She’d lost Damon. She’d failed.



The windows of the school glowed red as flames within climbed the walls, reaching for the upper floors. The bricks of its façade were cracking in the heat. As Elena and her friends watched from the parking lot, a window shattered.

“Oh my God,” Bonnie said softly. The reflected flames made her pale face rosy. Next to her, Meredith leaned her head on Matt’s shoulder, gazing wide-eyed into the flames.

It seemed like the teachers had gotten everyone out of the dance, smoke-smeared and disheveled in the remains of their formal clothes. Near Elena’s group, a girl sobbed hysterically, long streaks of soot crossing her face, while farther away, one of the football players hacked dryly, a casualty of the smoke.

Only a few minutes after Meredith and Elena had reached the parking lot, the fire trucks pulled in, sirens screaming. But by that time, the flames were already leaping high. Elena had heard Mr. Landon, the science teacher, muttering about the electrical wiring of the old building, saying it was a deathtrap, but Elena knew better. This had to be Damon’s work.

Elean jumped as another window shattered, this time under the blast of water from a fire hose. The firemen were putting up a good fight, dragging hoses across the parking lot, working together quickly and efficiently, and had at least contained the fire to only half of the school.

Elena looked around the circle of firelit faces. There was Caroline, her auburn head held high despite the flakes of black ash falling on the parking lot around her. Next to her, Sue Carson huddled under her boyfriend’s suit jacket that she had pulled over her thin dress. Vickie Bennett was with a group of jocks and cheerleaders, all quiet and subdued. Even among the kids who hated the school, there were no cheers, no laughter. Everyone was shocked into silence.

An ambulance pulled into the lot, its blue light revolving. One of the

paramedics got out and jogged across the lot toward a group of firefighters, calling, "Everybody out?"

The firefighter called back in the affirmative, but Elena's breath caught. She swung around, searching desperately.

"Do you see Stefan anywhere?" she asked the others. They looked around, too, their faces anxious.

Maybe he was gone before the fire started.

That didn't make sense, though. Why would Damon start this fire, if Stefan hadn't been here? That was who he wanted to hurt most.

"We'd better tell the fire chief." Matt strode off in the direction of the fire trucks.

That won't help.

Fire was one of the few things that could kill a vampire. There wasn't time for the fire fighters to find Stefan. And if they did, it wouldn't be safe, for them or for him.

Elena straightened up, squaring her shoulders. There was no way she was standing uselessly by while Stefan died. Not again.

She had to get past the fire fighters. They were grouped closest to the front of the building, where the fire was at its worst. Over at the side, the school was darker, deserted.

Elena shifted her feet, considering the best way to sneak around the building from where she stood.

"What are you doing?" Bonnie asked.

"I'm going to look for Stefan," Elena told them.

"We'll come with you," Meredith said quickly.

"No," Elena said. "You guys stay here and make sure Stefan isn't outside. If you see him, keep him with you."

"Um, what if we see Damon?" Bonnie asked uneasily. "Do you want us to tell him anything?"

Elena hesitated. Was there any message she could send through her friends that would lessen Damon's anger? She didn't think so. "If you see him, just stay out of his way, okay?" she asked. He was probably long gone, anyway.

She worked her way across the parking lot, sticking to the shadows. As she

reached the edge of the lot, she walked between the trees on one side and the cars on the other, eyes on the corner of the school building.

“Get back, miss,” a fireman told her as he hurried past. She stepped away from the building, watching him until he had forgotten her and disappeared into the mass of men fighting the flames.

There was a puddle of water at her feet, left by one of the fire hoses. Elena knelt, fumbling at the hem of her dress. She felt a twinge of regret for her beautiful dress as she gripped the crimson silk with both hands and tore. A long strip of silk came off the bottom of the dress. She dipped it into the dirty water of the puddle, soaking the fabric thoroughly.

There was a crash from the far side of the building, something inside collapsing, and, in one motion, the crowd and the fire fighters turned in that direction.

Elena seized her chance and ran, cold water dripping over her hand from the torn piece of her dress. Close up, the fire was *loud*. The flames roared, and the dry wood of the school building snapped and popped as it burned.

Around the corner, it was darker. The flames hadn’t reached here yet. A fire exit gaped open, and Elena braced herself and stepped through.

The heat hit her like a wave. A haze of smoke hung in the air, and Elena pressed the wet silk over her nose and mouth to block it out. Her eyes began to water and ache.

Where would Damon have taken Stefan? Nowhere where the fire was burning yet, Elena thought. He would want Stefan’s suffering more drawn out than that, would want him to hear the crackle of the flames, smell the smoke, and know that the deadly fire—one of the few things that *could* kill Stefan—was getting closer and closer, and that he had no hope of escape. Damon had said he wanted Stefan to suffer.

Of course. She cocked her head to look up the staircase ahead of her. It still looked stable enough. He’d be somewhere high enough that the smoke and heat would rise around him, where he’d feel the flames rising to lick against the floor beneath him. Damon would have put Stefan in the bell tower.

Elena climbed. The silk at her mouth filtered out the worst of the smoke, but she still choked and gasped, each breath coming with more difficulty than the last. Heavy boots clumped through the halls on the other side of the building. Fire fighters, she supposed, but she saw no one, just the heavy haze of smoke.

From somewhere below came the crash of a falling support beam, and the floor underfoot shook. Elena grabbed at the banister to steady herself, then sped up. She wobbled, and her feet ached as she ran. High heels were no good for this, but bare feet would be worse, so she had to keep going.

On the third floor, the staircase ended. She peered around, trying to spot the entrance to the bell tower through the worsening smoke. Her eyes burned, and she coughed—the wet silk was drying, it wasn't protecting her enough now.

There it was. She crossed the hall and laid her hand against the wood of the small door to the bell tower. It was cool still, no fire behind it. But the knob wouldn't turn.

It was locked; of course it was locked. The school didn't want the students messing around up here. Elena squeezed her eyes shut against the smoke. What was she going to do?

She tugged at the door again, and then began to throw herself against it. She had to get through. "Stefan!" she called. "Stefan! Can you hear me?"

There was no answer.

The door wasn't made to withstand a continuous assault. Elena threw all her weight against it over and over, ignoring the bruises she could feel blossoming on her shoulder and side. At last, the flimsy lock broke, and the door burst open. She tumbled through and fell to her knees, gasping and coughing.

Elena scrambled back to her feet and up the narrow rickety staircase to the top of the tower. Beneath the heavy bronze bell, archways opened on all four sides, and at last she could breathe. She staggered to one of the arches and took a few deep breaths, looking out over the parking lot below. Police cars were pulling in now, their red and blue lights flashing.

Her head was spinning less now that she had taken a few gulps of air, and Elena turned back around to look at the inside of the bell tower.

There was a weak motion, down in the darkest corner of the cupola. A small sound, barely more than a whimper. Elena crossed toward it and fell to her knees. There was a huddled dark shape there, and he shifted to stare up at her. Stefan mumbled something, his voice thick and choked.

"It's all right," she said automatically, running her fingers soothingly through his hair. He was tied up, and there was a band of fabric across his mouth, pulled viciously tight.

He flinched under her hand, scrabbling back toward the wall. He didn't seem to recognize her. She worked her hands beneath the gag, trying to untie its tight knot with her fingers. She couldn't loosen it.

She fumbled around on the floor, feeling around in the dark for something sharp. The floor was hot beneath her hands and knees—the fire must be rising below them.

Her fingers closed around a sharp-edged stone, and she worked it against the gag, feeling the cloth's fibers rip. Finally, it came loose and she pulled it away from Stefan's mouth.

As she removed the gag, something else spilled over his lips. Elena leaned closer, bracing herself with one hand on the rough brickwork above Stefan's head, squinting to see what was there.

Thin stalks of vervain sputtered out of Stefan's mouth. He gagged and choked as he spit them out. Anger rushed through Elena, as hot and sudden as a bolt of lightning.

"How dare he?" she muttered. "How *dare* he?" Damon had stuffed his brother's mouth with vervain, muting his powers and muddling his mind. And then he had left him to die, alone, confused, and in pain.

Heedless of Stefan's sharp canines this time, she used two fingers to scoop out more of the vervain clogging his mouth. One tooth scraped her finger stingingly, but she barely noticed.

As his mouth emptied, she could hear Stefan breathing, long, ragged hoarse breaths. She pushed her forefinger in again, checking that she had gotten every piece.

Stefan's tongue dragged slowly against her finger. Elena hesitated, and he latched on, sucking desperately at the cut on her finger.

After a moment, Stefan's eyelashes fluttered and his eyes slowly opened. He stared at Elena for a second before recognition filtered into his gaze. Abruptly, he pulled away.

"Elena," he said roughly, and panic flashed across his pale face. "I ... don't know how to explain this."

The bricks beneath Elena's knees were getting uncomfortably hot now. The fire must be climbing. "We have to get out of here," she said, her pulse pounding.

Stefan's eyes widened, and he strained visibly. The ropes around his wrists

snapped first, and then the ones around his ankles. Without the vervain, they couldn't hold him. He began, slowly, to climb to his feet. "Is the door blocked?" he asked.

"I-I think so," Elena said. "The fire was spreading really fast."

Stefan shook his head as if he was shaking off the last of the vervain's effects. "Trust me," he said. Drawing Elena up into his arms, Stefan climbed into the archway.

Holding her tightly, Stefan leaped into the night.



“Who *are* you?” Stefan asked. “How did you find me tonight?” After their leap from the school, he’d brought her back to his room at Mrs. Flowers’ boardinghouse. He leaned against the wall by the window, his finely drawn features so pale they could have been carved out of marble.

Elena clasped her hands in her lap. “I knew that Damon must have started the fire, and, after what he said to you, I had a feeling that he wouldn’t have let you make it out,” she said slowly.

Stefan pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers, as if his head hurt. “And how do you know Damon?”

“I met him in the graveyard.” It seemed wise to stick to the simplest answer.

Coming a step closer, Stefan narrowed his eyes. “You knew what was going on with the vervain. It didn’t surprise you or scare you when we leaped from the bell tower, or when I fed from you. You know what Damon and I are.”

There was something threatening about Stefan now as he almost loomed above her. Elena raised her hands in surrender, doing her best to look harmless. “I’m not your enemy,” she said. “Yours or Damon’s. I only want to help.”

She hoped that her sincerity shone through. All she wanted to do was to save them both.

Stefan leaned back against the wall. Rubbing a hand across his face, he laughed, a miserable, rough laugh. “There’s nothing *to* help, Elena. Damon and I are monsters, and the sooner we get out of this town the better off everyone else will be. If I leave here, he’ll follow me. You’ll be safe.” Shaking his head, he added, “I should have known better than to try, to pretend to be human.”

“No, Stefan, please,” Elena was out of her chair without even thinking about it. Reaching out to take Stefan’s hands in her own, she squeezed them

tightly. “It wasn’t a mistake.” He shook his head and started to pull away, and Elena stepped closer still, looking up into his eyes. “We can work together. We can keep Damon under control. You don’t have to be alone.”

Stefan eyes grew darker as he held Elena’s gaze. And then he bent his head to her lips. For a moment, it was as if the whole world was just the two of them, heat rushing through Elena’s body.

It was all so familiar. They were both filthy and stinking of smoke, but it could have been the night of their first Homecoming—when Stefan had rescued her from Tyler in the graveyard and brought her here. Maybe it was destiny after all. They were always going to end up here, tired and drained, secrets stretching the space between them.

At the thought, Elena pulled away, suddenly cold as she stepped out of Stefan’s arms.

“I’m sorry,” Elena stammered. “I didn’t mean ... I can’t do this right now.” She felt as if the world was shifting under her feet.

Stefan turned away so she couldn’t quite see his face. “I apologize,” he said. “I’ll take you home.”

Elena followed him down the darkened stairway, brushing her fingers against her lips. *This is all my fault*, she thought, as she left the boardinghouse and crossed the dirt driveway to Stefan’s low, black Porsche. If she hadn’t kissed Stefan, if Damon hadn’t seen her, things between them wouldn’t be deteriorating. The school wouldn’t have burned down today.

Stefan’s car was just as smooth and luxurious a ride as Damon’s. The engine’s purr was the only sound in the car as Elena and Stefan sat silently, each wrapped in their own thoughts. Stefan’s eyes were fixed on the road, and his body was stiff with tension. Elena sighed and wrapped her arms around herself.

How could Stefan and Damon hate each other so much? Elena thought of the rueful affection she’d seen grow between the brothers over the past few years in her own life. They played pool together. They fenced and played cards, all the entertainments they’d both learned to pass the time over the centuries. They fought side by side, graceful and deadly.

The brothers always came back together when it mattered most. They’d saved each other’s lives more than once.

Elena remembered Damon’s fury after Stefan’s death. And more, she remembered the pure despair on his face, the way he had looked as he told her

that now there was no one, no one at all, who remembered him when he was alive, when he was a human. He'd lost his past.

How had they gotten from *here* to *there*?

Then, as Stefan's car purred around the corner onto Elena's street, she finally got it. The loneliness in Stefan's eyes, his room carefully designed for one monastic, solitary life. Damon's vicious hatred for his little brother, paired with the fact that, wherever Stefan went, Damon watched him from afar. Even in tonight's fire, Damon had left him far away from the flames. If Stefan hadn't gotten away, would Damon have come back for him?

They always came back to each other.

Stefan and Damon were each other's *family*, all they had left. And all their love and history might have gotten tangled up into one big ball of resentment and anger, but that didn't mean it wasn't still there. She knew it was still there. She'd seen it in the future, as strong as ever.

Maybe it wasn't Elena who had changed Damon, back in her own time. Mylea had said that love would save Damon, would save them all. But it wasn't Elena's love that would do it.

From now on, she realized with a blinding flash, she wasn't going to try to make Damon fall in love with her.

Instead, she needed to fix Stefan and Damon. If they could just be *brothers* again, everything else would fall into place.

Stefan pulled up in front of Elena's house and stopped. Her front door flew open, and Aunt Judith and Robert rushed out onto the lawn. No doubt they'd heard about the fire.

Before she opened the car door to reassure them, Elena turned to Stefan and laid her hand over his.

"I know what we have to do now. We can fix everything," she told him, feeling strong and sure. "Tomorrow, we're going to look for Damon."



Dear Diary,

I woke up this morning and I wished I were dead.

Not really, I suppose. If I meant it, I would just let things take their course. Grab at the chance of a brief happiness with Stefan, knowing that it will lead to so much suffering, to the destruction of all three of us.

But Damon was so full of anger. The way he looked at me when he found me in Stefan's arms—he never looked at me that way before, even when things between us were at their worst. Like he hated me.

Elena glanced at the clock. She needed to leave for school soon. Downstairs, she could hear the familiar clatter of Aunt Judith making breakfast. It felt so much like the morning when Damon had driven her to school, when it had seemed like everything was falling into place. She began to write again.

I refuse to believe that I've ruined everything.

If I can just show Damon how much Stefan still loves him, how much they need each other, maybe things will turn out okay after all. I have to believe that. I can't give up on us, not yet.

* * *

"One day off," Bonnie fumed, flicking her red curls over her shoulder as the two girls crossed the parking lot together. "We go through a completely traumatizing event, and they can't give us even one day off."

"It's amazing how quickly they pulled all this together, though," Elena commented. In daylight, she could see that the school hadn't *entirely* burned down.

One side of the building, where the office and most of the classrooms were,

was charred and half-collapsed. Elena couldn't suppress a shudder as she looked at the bell tower. The staircase she had climbed to find Stefan must be entirely gone. But the other side, where the auditorium and cafeteria were, looked mostly solid even though stained a dirty gray by the smoke. The heavy smell of ash hung over everything.

Behind the school now stood a row of temporary white trailers to be used as classrooms for the rest of the year, until the school could be rebuilt. All around the trailers, students gathered in groups, leaning eagerly toward each other to gossip. Harried administrators were trying to shepherd everyone into the right trailers. Everything seemed to be in only slightly controlled chaos.

"See you later," Bonnie called as she veered off into chemistry, and Elena found the trailer where her trig class was. Meredith was already there, her homework laid out neatly in front of her.

As Elena settled into the desk beside her, Meredith looked up with a worried frown. "Have you heard the gossip?" she asked. "Everyone's saying that Stefan started the fire."

Elena remembered with a twinge of dismay the low, excited, I've-got-a-secret tone to the whispers before class.

They'd been here before. It might start at the high school, but the rumors would spread all over town. Adults would get upset. Stefan would be shunned.

"That's ridiculous," she said sharply.

Meredith bit her lip. "There's no real evidence. Everyone used to think the way he keeps to himself was romantic, but now they're saying it's creepy. He disappeared from the dance right before the fire started."

"So did we," Elena objected.

"We were all together." Meredith dipped her head, shuffling the papers around on her desk. "I don't want to believe it, but it is strange how Stefan disappeared. When Matt told the fire fighters that Stefan wasn't there, they started searching for him to make sure he wasn't in the building. You said you didn't see him when you looked either."

Elena winced. It had seemed simpler when she got home just to call Bonnie and Meredith and tell them she had given up and decided to leave. Now it was too late to pretend to have run into Stefan.

"They found him back at his boardinghouse. When the police questioned

him he was *covered* in smoke and ash.” Meredith raised her head, her gray eyes troubled. “I’m not saying Stefan did anything. And I promise not to tell anyone that Damon was there, either. But maybe you should stay away from both of them, Elena.”

“Anybody could have set that fire!” Elena said, her voice a little too loud. The teacher looked up from her desk inquiringly, and Elena lowered her voice. “It was probably somebody sneaking a cigarette.”

Meredith’s forehead creased in concern. “Elena, you don’t even know Stefan. You’ve been avoiding him since he started school. And then, suddenly, you’ve kissed him—*once*—and now you won’t hear anything against him? I thought you were with Damon.”

“I am, but—” Elena began.

“Okay, time to stop the chatter and review your homework assignments,” Ms. Halpern said, stepping up to the front of the room. With one more worried glance, Meredith turned away from Elena to face the teacher.

Elena chewed on her lip. This was worse than the first time she had been here. Then, everyone had started suspecting Stefan of being responsible for Mr. Tanner’s murder after Halloween. The gossip had spread until, despite the lack of any real evidence, everyone was convinced Stefan was the killer. Aunt Judith had banned Elena from seeing Stefan, and some of the adults in town—Tyler’s dad, especially—had been ready to form a lynch mob and attack him.

Now, because of Elena, all the suspicion and hatred for Stefan was starting earlier. And, that time, at least Meredith and Bonnie had been on her side. They hadn’t had any more proof of Stefan’s innocence then than they did now, but they had believed Elena when she swore he was innocent. They’d believed her because they knew she knew Stefan.

Elena wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold. If Fell’s Church turned against Stefan earlier, maybe it would all happen earlier. Was Elena doomed to drive off Wickery Bridge and drown, no matter what she did? She could almost feel that icy dark water rising around her.

Was it hopeless for her to try to fight fate? Was Stefan doomed to die? Would Elena end up back in that cold gray in-between place, heading for death?

The rest of the morning, Elena kept an eye out for Stefan whenever she moved from one trailer classroom to another, but she never saw him. Crowds

of students gathered on the crumbling black asphalt between the trailers, talking in low, excited voices. Elena hoped Stefan had come to school today. Nothing would fan the flames of the rumor more than if it seemed that Stefan was hiding.

When she got to history class, Stefan's seat was empty. Elena's shoulders slumped. Mr. Tanner began to lecture about the English Civil War, and Elena stared down at her notebook, her eyes stinging.

"I see you've decided to grace us with your presence, Mr. Salvatore." Mr. Tanner's voice was whip-sharp. Elena lifted her head.

Stefan, grim-faced, hesitated in the doorway. Mr. Tanner waved an arm in an exaggerated gesture of courtesy. "Please, take a seat," he said. "We're all so glad you decided to wander in."

Stefan sat down without glancing at Elena. He bent his head over his desk. His shoulders were stiffly set, betraying his awareness of the gossip and hatred buzzing around him. Elena sighed. He probably thought it was deserved, even though he hadn't started the fire. Stefan, the Stefan of now, thought he was a monster and that people *should* fear and hate him.

Elena sat up straight and glared around the classroom. The girls beside Stefan, who had been nudging each other and whispering, exchanged a glance and turned back to their books with new interest.

Caroline, though, stared straight back at Elena, her lips turning up in a smirk. Tilting her head, she whispered something to the girl next to her, her eyes never leaving Elena's, and her smile widened. She and the other girl both laughed.

At least Dick and Tyler's desks were empty, since they were still suspended. It was Tyler who had whipped up a frenzy against Stefan last time. Tyler was a bully, he always had been. Elena sighed and pressed a hand against her forehead.

Was everything bound to slide toward the same ends, no matter what she did? Were some things inevitable?

No. She couldn't believe that. She pulled back her shoulders and sat up straight, running a cold eye over Caroline, who was still smirking. When the other girl finally looked away, Elena felt a jolt of satisfaction. Elena was still the queen of the school after all.

When class finally ended, Elena shot out of her seat and grabbed Stefan's arm, pulling him aside before he could leave the trailer classroom.

“You’re not afraid to be seen with me?” he asked softly, his head down, eyes fixed on the ugly gray carpeting of the trailer. “They’re right not to trust me, Elena.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she told him, meeting the hostile looks of the other students as they edged past. Bonnie hesitated in the doorway, eyeing Stefan, and Elena gave her a quick, reassuring smile.

“Call me later,” Bonnie said pleadingly as she left.

Once the trailer was empty, Elena turned back to Stefan. She was still gripping his jacketed arm, so tightly that her fingers ached, but he barely seemed to notice. “We don’t have much time,” she told him. “We need a game plan. We need to get Damon under control.”

Stefan huffed a short, bitter laugh. “Damon’s never under control.”

“Stefan, look at me.” Letting go of his sleeve, Elena reached up and framed Stefan’s face with her hands. His skin was cool, and his cheekbones were strong and wide beneath her fingers. She waited for him to bring his eyes up to meet hers, her heart beating hard as the connection between them slid into place, that sense of recognition and almost magnetic attraction. His face cradled in her hands, Stefan blinked as if he was seeing her for the first time.

“Don’t give up,” she said, trying to put the weight of all the secret knowledge she had—all the things she couldn’t tell him in words—behind what she said. “You’re the only one who can change things with your brother. I believe in you.”

Stefan gently pulled away from her hands, and Elena ached as their contact broke. His face was sorrowful. “I don’t think that Damon can change,” he said. “But I think I know where he is.”



Unlike the neatly maintained, modern part of the graveyard where Elena's parents lay, the section dating back to the Civil War was overgrown and crumbling. Long creepers draped themselves across worn gray tombstones, and the ground was uneven beneath Elena's feet. Half-broken weeping saints and angels loomed overhead, and the dark, iron-barred fronts of the mausoleums gave Elena the sense that anyone could be watching them.

"I don't understand why you think Damon would be *here*," she said, stumbling over a broken tombstone hidden in the grass. She grabbed Stefan's arm to keep from falling.

"This is exactly the place Damon would be," Stefan said, his gaze moving watchfully from the ruined church to a mausoleum half concealed by overgrown yew trees. "He thinks acting like a creature of the night is funny. He wants death all around him."

Elena frowned. It didn't really sound like Damon to *her*. The Damon she knew liked clean, modern lines. And he loved luxury. He didn't stay anywhere long, but the houses and apartments she'd seen Damon live in were rich and elegant. He filled them with every possible comfort but almost nothing personal, nothing he wouldn't be willing to leave behind. He didn't court the trimmings of death.

Stefan glanced down at her with a slight, bitter smile. "How well do you know my brother really, Elena? You see what he wants you to see."

Elena shook her head, but didn't answer. Stefan had a point. If she really had met Damon just a few weeks ago, how well could she have known him?

Elena's eyes lingered on the ruined church. It was half-collapsed, most of the roof fallen in. Only three of its walls were standing.

Katherine was underneath there, in the old church's crypt. She might be watching them at this very moment. There was no trace of fog, no cold wind, no blue-eyed white kitten prowling in the dead grass around the church. If Katherine was there, she was lying low, content to watch for now.

When Stefan turned toward the church, Elena nudged him away. “Let’s look in the mausoleums,” she said.

The grim mausoleums made of granite and iron scattered around the old churchyard. Each housed the bones of a family of original settlers of Fell’s Church. They were dark and forbidding now, overgrown with ivy, their flagstone paths pitted by time. One had the Gilbert name, Elena’s father’s family, but she didn’t know much about the people whose bones laid there, except that one had been a young soldier killed in the Civil War.

Elena and Stefan slipped into an easy routine, working their way clockwise from one mausoleum to the next around the churchyard. Elena would stand lookout while Stefan forced each narrow door.

There was no sign of Damon in the Gilbert mausoleum, only three gray stone coffins and a dusty vase, which must have once been used for flowers. The space inside was claustrophobically narrow, its air stale, and Elena was glad to back out again after one quick look.

Surely if Damon were living here, he would have chosen her family’s mausoleum, as some sort of elaborate tease. Elena stumbled as they moved on to the next small tomb, and Stefan steadied her. “Careful,” he said. “The ground’s uneven.”

Elena cast a glance across to the newer part of the graveyard. “I’m more worried about someone catching us vandalizing graves than I am about tripping,” she said.

Stefan cocked his head, sending Power out around the graveyard. “There’s no one here,” he said. He looked drawn and tired. He probably hadn’t fed recently enough to be able to Influence anyone into forgetting about them if they were caught breaking into the tombs.

Elena stood by the next mausoleum and looked up at the ruins of the church as she listened to the grating noise of Stefan forcing the tomb’s door. At least she had the vervain in her pocket. If Katherine came out of the catacombs, she wouldn’t be able to Influence Elena.

“There,” Stefan said with satisfaction. Elena stopped staring at the church and jostled her way in beside him.

It was as gray and dusty as the others had been, but the tops of the two tombs inside had been swept clean. On one sat a pile of neatly folded dark clothing. Elena rifled through it: all black, all designer, all clearly expensive. Some of them she had seen Damon wearing. The other tomb held a folded

blanket and a thin leather bound book.

Elena picked up the book. It was in Italian, and seemed to be a book of verse. “Stefan, what—” she began. A loud groan of rusted metal interrupted her, and, before she could move, the door to the tomb slammed shut. A huge thud followed, something terribly heavy slamming into the outside of the mausoleum. The small building shook, and Elena screamed, a high, thin noise.

Then there was silence. With the door closed, it was pitch-black inside the tomb. For a moment, Elena could hear nothing but the pounding of her own heart. From the other side of the tomb, Stefan swore.

“Stefan?” Elena asked, her voice rising.

Starting toward Stefan and the tomb’s door, she banged her elbow hard against something in the dark. “Ouch,” she said, and rubbed at it, tears prickling at the back of her eyes.

“Keep still,” Stefan said. She didn’t even hear him coming toward her, but suddenly he was touching her gently, running his hands over her arm.

“I don’t think anything’s broken,” he told her. “You’ll have a bruise, though.”

“Are we stuck in here?” Elena’s voice wavered, despite herself. She was suddenly, terrifyingly aware of the dead all around her. The tomb she stood beside was full of moldering bones.

There was a short pause, and then Stefan spoke, sounding grimmer than before. “Damon’s shut us in. I tried the door, but I can’t force it. There must be something jammed up against it, holding it closed.”

“Oh.” For the first time, Elena noticed how cold it was inside the mausoleum, the cold of a stone place that never felt the sun. She shivered.

“We’ll find a way out of here,” Stefan said, his voice lightening. “Or someone will come.” Suddenly, his hands were around her waist and he lifted her gently. In a second, she was sitting on the cold top of the tomb, and Stefan was beside her, wrapping his jacket around her shoulders.

For a while, they sat in silence. Stefan was reassuringly solid beside her and, after a while, Elena let herself lean slightly against him.

Who would come for them? It was rare that someone came into this part of the cemetery, even rarer after dark, and night was coming. Elena felt a clutch of panic in her chest, and her breath got shorter. She didn’t want to stay here.

“Stefan,” she said. She turned her head toward his.

“What is it, Elena?”

“There is a way for you to get us out of here.” She brushed her hair away from her neck, dipping her head in a clear invitation.

Stefan’s breath caught and he shifted away, his slight warmth disappearing from her side. When he spoke again, he sounded choked. “I can’t.”

“You can. If you’re going to save us, you need the strength my blood will give you.”

“Elena.” Stefan sounded panicked, and she automatically reached for his hand in the dark to reassure him. “I haven’t fed from a human being for a long time. I tried once, not long ago”—*The man under the bridge*, Elena’s mind supplied—“and I couldn’t control myself. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” Elena told him, hanging onto his cold hand. “I trust you.” He still hesitated, and she added, “It’s the only way out of here, Stefan.”

With a small, soft sigh of surrender, Stefan bent his head to her throat.

It had been so *long* since she had been with Stefan like this. Elena’s eyes filled with tears of joy and sorrow at the familiar twin pricks of pain as his canines slid beneath her skin. His lips were gentle against her throat, and his pulse was speeding to pound in time with hers.

Elena tried to hold back the memories that were tumbling through her mind: the night she had pledged to be Stefan’s forever—*sleek and elegant in his best suit, his eyes wide and wondering, greener than ever*—the first night they had kissed, after Homecoming in that other world—*the look of helpless desire as he bent his head to hers*—the incredulity and horror in his face when she was reborn as a vampire and at first forgot who they were to each other—*the pure defeat on his face as he let her claw at him*. The life they’d built together. The warmth and comfort she’d found in his arms as he’d held Elena close.

Even though she kept the memories from him, Elena couldn’t help some of her emotions pouring through the careful wall they’d constructed between them. Love and tenderness and regret. Pain and joy. Guilt. Passion.

It was enough that, as he slowly withdrew his canines from her throat, Stefan cupped her face for a moment, his fingers cool against her skin. She could see nothing through the darkness, but Elena thought he was staring into her eyes. “Who *are* you?” he whispered, just as he had the night of the fire.

“Someone who cares about you,” Elena whispered. *Please*, she thought desperately, *please let me save him*.

Stefan’s hand lingered on Elena’s face for a moment, just a gentle brush of skin on skin, and then he was gone.

Over at the door, Elena heard a great, creaking crash, and then light appeared, flooding through the crack as Stefan forced the door open. There was a rustling, the sound of breaking branches, and finally a huge thud.

“You can come out now,” Stefan said, a dark shape against the light of the doorway.

Elena came through, squinting. It was brisk outside, although not with the heavy bone-chilling cold of the tomb, and the sun was setting. It was almost dark, really; it just seemed bright after the pitch blackness.

A huge oak tree lay across the churchyard, its branches brushing the door of the mausoleum where they had been trapped. It had been ripped out of the ground; Elena could see the great pit in the earth left by its roots.

“It was jammed up against the door,” Stefan told her.

Now that Elena’s eyes had adjusted to the evening light, she noticed the long, already healing scrapes on his arms from the tree’s branches. Stefan gazed past her, and Elena turned, following his eyes to the dent in the mausoleum’s stone façade, where the tree had slammed against it.

There was so much rage in the way the tree had been torn out of the earth and thrown against the stone tomb. Elena’s stomach twisted nervously. She might love Damon, but he had no love left for them.



It was fully dark by the time Elena slipped through her front door. She could feel her whole body relax at being home at last. The tall Victorian house where she'd lived since she was born felt clean and bright and warm, its heavy curtains shutting out the darkness. From the kitchen, she could hear the clatter of pans and smell a chicken roasting.

"Dinner in twenty minutes," Aunt Judith called cheerfully. Elena called back an acknowledgement, staring at herself in the mirror by the door. She looked tired and disheveled, her hair matted and a streak of dirt across her forehead. There was a purpling bruise on her throat where Stefan had bitten her, twin dots of dried blood in its center, and she pulled her shirt collar up to cover it.

"You're home!" Margaret thudded down the stairs and leaped toward Elena, catching her around the waist in a bear hug. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too," Elena said, laughing. "All day long." She bent to press her cheek against her little sister's soft hair and breathed in the Play-Doh and baby shampoo scent of her.

Pulling away, Margaret grinned up at her. "Your friend came over looking for you," she said. "He gave me this." She pulled a lollipop out of her pocket and waved it in triumph.

Elena examined the candy. It was a pink rose made out of thin slivers of almost-translucent hard candy. "Pretty," she said. "Matt gave you this?" Matt had a soft spot for Margaret, and he was always bringing her little treats.

"No, your friend Damon gave it to me," Margaret said, and tried to take the lollipop back.

A wave of panic washed over Elena, and her fingers tightened automatically on the candy. Elena had invited him into her home. How could she have been so stupid?

"Give it," Margaret said, pulling on the candy.

“No, wait,” Elena said, but Margaret yanked the lollipop out of her hand, pulled it out of the wrapper, and defiantly stuck it into her mouth before Elena could snatch it back.

It was wrapped, Elena reassured herself as she watched her baby sister eat the candy with evident enjoyment. Poison wasn’t really Damon’s style. If he had wanted to hurt Margaret or Aunt Judith, he would have done it more directly. No, this had just been a warning. Damon was letting Elena know that he could get to her family whenever he wanted.

“Listen to me, Margaret,” she said, squatting so that she was eye to eye with her little sister. “Damon’s not my friend, okay? If he comes here again, stay away from him.”

Margaret frowned. “He was really nice,” she said. “I don’t know why you don’t want to be friends with him.”

Was it Margaret saying this, or was it something Damon had told her to say, Elena wondered. What if Damon had used his Power to Influence her little sister? She looked into Margaret’s sky-blue eyes, trying to see if there was anything off about her, any sign that her words were not her own.

The Damon that Elena loved wouldn’t have used his Power on a child, Elena thought. He would have considered it ungentlemanly and beneath him. With a heavy, sick feeling, she admitted to herself that she didn’t know exactly what the Damon of this time was capable of.

“Meggie, can you come put the napkins on the table for me, please?” Aunt Judith called from the kitchen, and Margaret twisted out of Elena’s hands and was gone without a word.

Elena headed up the stairs, her steps slow and heavy. She had to think. There must be some way to get Aunt Judith and Margaret away from here. She couldn’t let them get hurt, and she couldn’t let Damon use them as pawns to hurt Elena.

By the time she reached the top of the stairs, Elena had made up her mind. She went into the bathroom and grabbed a towel. Pulling off one of her shoes, she wrapped the towel around it and then opened the hall window. Outside, the branches of the quince tree almost brushed the window frame. It was close enough that someone could conceivably climb inside, although it would be a dangerous stretch.

Bracing herself, she slammed the heel of the shoe against the window’s catch. The towel muffled the sound of the blow, but not as much as Elena had

hoped. She paused and listened. Aunt Judith was running water downstairs, and under the noise of the water, Elena could hear both the television and Margaret singing to herself. Trusting in the noise downstairs to cover the thuds, Elena slammed the heel of her shoe against the window catch again and again until it finally bent and twisted, breaking.

With a sharp crack, the pane of glass below the catch shattered, broken glass falling in shards onto the hall carpet. Elena froze. She hadn't expected that. Still, maybe it made the whole scene more convincing.

Quickly and quietly, Elena picked up a silver candlestick from the windowsill. She took a carved jade box from a little table in the hall and a small marble figure of an angel that her parents had once brought home from Italy from another. Hurrying into her room, she slipped her shoe back on, wrapped the objects in the towel, and shoved the bundled towel deep into her closet.

After one last glance around to make sure everything was concealed, she went back to stand in front of the broken hall window, took a deep breath, and screamed.

There was a sudden, shocked silence downstairs, followed by a flurry of movement. "Elena?" Aunt Judith called worriedly, running up the stairs. "What happened? Are you all right?"

Elena turned to meet her as she reached the top of the stairs. "I think someone broke in," she said. She was so full of dread that it was easy to infuse the words with fear.

As Elena pointed them out, Aunt Judith examined the broken catch, the smashed windowpane, and the spots where knickknacks were missing from the hall. Looking in her own room and Elena's, she saw that nothing else seemed to be missing.

"I don't know," she said finally, doubtfully. "A branch could have blown against the window and broken it. It seems strange to me that a thief would take just three little objects, and nothing else. All my jewelry's still here, and I had some money on my dresser that's completely untouched."

Elena wanted to scream with frustration. She didn't have to try hard at all to bring tears to her eyes or a waver to her voice.

"Please, Aunt Judith," she said. "I really don't think any of us should sleep here tonight. Can't you and Margaret go to Robert's, at least until we can get someone to fix the window? Anyone could come in."

Aunt Judith hesitated. “What about you, Elena?” she asked. “I’m certainly not going to leave you here all alone.”

“I can go to Meredith’s,” Elena said quickly. “It’s closer to school, and her parents won’t mind.”

Convincing Aunt Judith was agonizing. A hundred times, she wondered if they were just being hysterical and almost changed her mind about leaving the house. Once she *had* finally agreed to leave the house, she insisted on them all sitting down and eating dinner together.

Elena could barely nibble the juicy roast chicken even though she recognized that it was delicious. Her eyes kept straying to the darkness beyond the dining room windows. Was Damon out there? She could imagine him in his crow form, huddled on a branch and watching her with bright, malicious eyes.

By the time Robert’s gray Volvo turned into the drive, Elena felt like she was almost bursting out of her skin with anxious, restless energy. They had to *go*. They had to get away, before it was too late.

Grabbing her sister with one hand and both their bags with the other, Elena hustled Margaret out to the car, ignoring her protests, and buckled her securely into her booster seat.

“Do you want me to check the window?” Robert said, politely getting out of the car to take Aunt Judith’s bag and open the passenger’s side door for her.

“No!” said Elena sharply before Aunt Judith could answer. When they both looked at her in surprise, she gave them a small, weak smile. “Sorry. I’m just so nervous. Can’t we get out of here?”

As they pulled out of the driveway, Elena settled watchfully in the backseat next to Margaret, her overnight bag clutched in her lap. She felt sure that nothing would happen to them on the drive over to Meredith’s. And then, after they dropped her off, she could only hope that Damon would lose interest in them. At least he’d never been invited into Robert’s house. Getting Aunt Judith and Margaret as far away from her as she could seemed like the only way to protect them.

* * *

“This is the best part,” Bonnie said as she rolled onto her stomach on Meredith’s bed, her eyes fixed on the TV screen a few feet away. “After he kisses her, you know they’re going to get past all the stuff that came between

them.”

“I still think she should have ended up with her friend instead,” Meredith said critically from where she leaned against the headboard. “That was the first ending, you know, and the test audiences hated it so much that they reshot it.”

“And rightly so,” Bonnie said. “Bleah.”

Elena laughed and jostled against her. “There’s nothing wrong with him. I think he’s cute.”

“Bleah,” Bonnie said again, wrinkling her nose.

The sick, dread-filled feeling in the pit of Elena’s stomach hadn’t gone away for a moment. But, despite all of that, it was good to be here once more. When Bonnie had heard that Elena was spending the night, she had invited herself over, too. The warm smell of baking cookies rose comfortingly from the kitchen downstairs.

“Hey, would you braid my hair?” Bonnie asked, as the couple on screen finally kissed.

“Sure,” Elena said, and Bonnie wiggled around so that her back was to Elena.

“Do you want a French braid?” Elena asked. Bonnie nodded, and Elena began separating the curling strands of Bonnie’s hair just as the oven timer went off downstairs.

“I’ve got it,” Meredith said, hopping up.

“Wait, I’ll come with you,” Elena told her, letting go of Bonnie’s curls.

“I think I can handle it,” Meredith said wryly.

After a moment of hesitation, Elena took hold of Bonnie’s hair again. This was Meredith’s house, and Damon wasn’t invited in. She would be fine.

“So ...” Bonnie said playfully as Meredith left the room. “Who’s the better kisser, Stefan or Damon?”

Elena winced. “It’s not that easy.”

“Easy or not, I bet they’re both pretty good, aren’t they?” Bonnie asked. Elena could hear the cheeky grin in her voice.

Heat flooded Elena’s cheeks. She thought of the nostalgic emotions that had washed through her as Stefan kissed and, darker and more intimate, the

way it had felt when Damon had drunk her blood. “Yeah,” she admitted in a tiny voice.

“Uh-huh,” Bonnie said smugly. Then she twisted around to look at Elena, her brown eyes bright with sincerity. “If you say Stefan didn’t set the fire, I believe you, Elena.”

“I know he didn’t,” Elena said.

“*Mmm*. He’s much too cute to be a psycho.”

Elena laughed despite herself. “I’m not sure that’s the best way to tell.”

She busied herself twining Bonnie’s hair into an elegant braid. “There,” she said, after a few minutes. “Gorgeous.”

Bonnie bounced to her feet. Going to the full-length mirror hanging on the back of Meredith’s closet door, she turned her head from side to side, admiring herself. “Nice. Thank you.”

As she watched Bonnie, Elena became aware of a niggling sense of something not quite right.

“Does it seem to you like Meredith’s taking a really long time?” she asked.

Eyes still on her own reflection, Bonnie lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I know, right?” she said. “How long does it take to put some cookies on a plate? I’m starving.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Elena began, and then the door opened and her shoulders sagged with relief. Meredith was back.

“About time,” Bonnie said cheerfully, and grabbed a cookie.

“Careful, they’re hot,” Meredith said, smiling. Then she caught Elena’s eye and her smile faded. “What’s wrong?”

Elena felt like she was frozen in place. Looped around Meredith’s neck was a deep red scarf that she certainly hadn’t been wearing when she went downstairs.

“Why are you wearing that?” she said, her voice cracking. “Take it off.”

Bonnie and Meredith looked at each other, their eyebrows lifting. “Um ... Elena?” Bonnie asked. “What are you talking about?”

“The scarf!” Elena insisted. “Take it off right now!” She should have gone downstairs with Meredith. It had been stupid of her to think they would be safe, just because Damon hadn’t yet been invited into Meredith’s house. Even

if he hadn't had his Power, Damon would have been able to charm and talk his way into almost anywhere. *With* all the Power at his command, all he would have to do was ask. And Meredith was defenseless: She didn't even know that Damon was someone to be afraid of.

"I don't know what your problem is, Elena," Meredith grumbled, slowly unwrapping the scarf from around her throat. "I was cold, okay? It's freezing downstairs. And I think this looks nice."

Elena stared. Unwilling to trust her eyes, she went closer and, ignoring Meredith's startled objections, brushed the other girl's hair aside and inspected her neck. It was smooth and unmarked. No vampire had touched her.

"Hey!" Meredith finally said, stepping back and staring at Elena. "Personal space! Please."

"Sorry, sorry. I thought there was something on your throat." Elena felt ridiculous.

"Like a mole or something?" Meredith said uneasily, rubbing the side of her neck.

"I don't know. Like a shadow, I guess."

Elena felt sick. Damon could get to them easily here if he wanted to. Was she putting Bonnie and Meredith in danger by staying here?

The other girls picked up on Elena's change in mood, and after only a little while, Bonnie stretched and said, with forced brightness, "Well, I'm wiped out."

"We should get to bed," Meredith agreed. "I've got a French test tomorrow."

Bonnie shared Meredith's double bed, and the loveseat in the corner of the bedroom unfolded into a narrow single bed for Elena. After they had all climbed into bed and Meredith had switched out the light, Elena thought of something.

"Hey," she called softly across the divide between their beds. "Do you still have the vervain I gave you?"

"The *what*?" Bonnie asked sleepily.

"The vervain. The plants I gave you after Homecoming. Do you still have them?"

“The weeds?” Bonnie’s voice was puzzled. “I don’t know what happened to them. They probably fell out of my hair. There was a fire going on, remember?”

“Meredith?”

“No,” Meredith said, sounding exasperated. She sat up and turned on the light. “I don’t remember what happened to the dried-out weeds you gave me at Homecoming.”

For a moment, Elena thought of telling them everything. They were her friends. And they were smart and brave; they’d been her allies through thick and thin. If they knew what was going on, they could help her. And they would be better able to protect themselves.

She licked her suddenly dry lips and took a quick breath. But it was that knowledge that had ruined their lives. She couldn’t do that to them, not again.

“I ... I’m sorry, you guys,” she said. “I know I’m acting weird. Just promise me you’ll be careful.” She would have to get more vervain and give it to them, hide it in their rooms and backpacks.

There was usually almost no physical resemblance between tiny, pale, redheaded Bonnie and tall, olive-skinned, raven-haired Meredith, but at that moment, the suspicious, exasperated, yet affectionate expressions on their faces were almost identical.

“We promise we’ll be careful,” Meredith said gently, and Bonnie nodded. “But we’re worried about you.”

“I know,” Elena said in a small voice. Silence stretched out between them and finally Meredith turned the light out again.

“We’re here for you,” Bonnie said in the darkness. “When you’re ready.”

“I know,” Elena whispered again.

As she lay in the dark and listened to her friends’ breathing gradually even out into the sounds of sleep, Elena turned and twisted from one side to the other, unable to get comfortable.

In Elena’s own time, Meredith was miserable. She tried to cope, and she had Alaric helping her, and she almost never complained. But that didn’t change the fact that Meredith had become a vampire, the one thing she never wanted to be.

Elena had to keep her out of this. Meredith deserved a chance at a normal life.

Knowing she had made the right decision, Elena finally dozed off into an uneasy sleep. When she woke, sunlight was shining brightly in the windows, and Meredith was standing at the foot of Elena's bed.

"Come on, sleepyhead," Meredith said lightly, jingling her car keys. "We've got to get to school."

"Okay, okay," Elena grumbled, sitting up and rubbing at her eyes. "I hardly slept, I couldn't—" She broke off in dismay, her words drying up.

Around her neck, Meredith was wearing the same deep red scarf she had worn last night. But something had changed while Elena slept. Below the scarf, she could see the edge of a deep purple-blue bruise. Elena knew exactly what it was, she had seen enough of them: a vampire bite.

Damon Influenced her, once we were all asleep, she thought, feeling dazed and nauseous. Nowhere is safe.



“We have to stop him,” Elena insisted. “He’s hurting the people I care about.” She could hear her own voice rising hysterically, and she took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm down. The seemingly endless school day was finally over, but there were plenty of students still milling around. Enough people at their school already thought Stefan was an arsonist, no need to feed the rumors by making it sound like he was fighting with the queen of the school.

The *former* queen of the school, Elena amended mentally, noting another pair of eyes sliding over her suspiciously as two girls from her chemistry class walked by, heading between the trailers toward the parking lot. Everyone had noticed how different Elena was this year, and being seen arguing intensely in corners with Stefan was only pounding the nails in the coffin of her popularity.

Elena couldn’t bring herself to care.

“Damon is coming after my friends,” she said to Stefan, gripping his sleeve even more tightly. “It’s all because of me. We have to protect them.”

“I know,” Stefan said. His leaf-green gaze was steady and reassuring. “Come back to the boardinghouse with me. We’ll figure something out.”

On the drive to the boardinghouse, Elena noticed how vividly red and yellow the leaves of the trees at the side of the road were getting. The long winding drive up to Mrs. Flowers’ boardinghouse was lined with graceful birch trees whose golden leaves glowed like candles. Elena shivered. Halloween was coming soon. They were running out of time.

The old redbrick boardinghouse was dark and silent. Stefan unlocked one of the oak double doors and led Elena up the flight of stairs ahead of them. On the second-story landing, Elena turned automatically to the right, putting a hand on the knob of the door to the bedroom there.

Stefan went still as he stared at Elena. “How did you know which way to go?” he asked.

Oops. When Stefan had brought her here after Homecoming, they had gone in to his room via the balcony. Elena had never been up these stairs before. Not in this version of her life, anyway. “Just guessing,” she said tentatively, and stood back to let him pass.

Stefan’s lips thinned suspiciously, but he didn’t say anything else. Elena meekly followed him through the bedroom and stood by as he opened what looked like a closet, revealing the flight of stairs that led up to his room.

Elena and Stefan stepped out of the stairway and into his dimly lit room. Stefan stopped dead, horror on his face. His room was destroyed. The heavy trunks that had stood between the windows were overturned, their lids smashed. Books cascaded from a broken bookcase, their covers dirty and torn as if they’d been stamped on. The blankets that had lain on Stefan’s narrow bed were shredded. A cold breeze blew through the room from a smashed window at the far end.

“My God,” Elena whispered. Damon must have done this.

The heavy mahogany dresser by the window was the only piece of furniture still standing, seemingly undamaged. Centered on its top stood a simple black iron box with a curving lid.

Stefan brushed past Elena and flung open the box. And then he froze, staring down into it.

“Stefan?” asked Elena softly after a moment. He didn’t move or answer, and she wasn’t sure if he had heard her. Stepping up beside him, she looked first at his face. It was even paler than usual, set in grim lines as if carved out of stone. His eyes, dark and stormy, stared unblinkingly down into the iron coffer, and Elena followed his gaze.

The box was empty.

Elena instantly understood. The iron box was where Stefan had kept his most precious things, the objects that recorded all his long, lonely history. His father’s watch, carried by Stefan since the fifteenth century. The ivory dagger he had been given for his thirteenth birthday. Golden coins from his homeland. An agate-and-silver cup his mother, dead at Stefan’s birth, had once treasured. Katherine’s lapis lazuli ring. In a different time, a silk ribbon from Elena’s hair.

All his treasures, gone. Elena looked back up at Stefan, but the words of sympathy she was about to say died on her lips. Stefan’s face was no longer blank and cold. Instead, it was twisted in silent fury, his lips drawn back in a

snarl.

He didn't look human, not anymore.

"I'll kill him," Stefan growled, his canines lengthening. "Damon destroys everything. For the *fun* of it."

Elena turned on her heel and raced down the stairs. "Mrs. Flowers!" she called as she hit the second floor. "Mrs. Flowers, where are you?" She stopped and listened, frustrated. Despite the many times she'd been in this house, she had never quite gotten a mental map of Mrs. Flowers' quarters, and the old witch woman wasn't especially likely to come when she was called.

"What is it, girl?" The voice was cold and clear, and Elena whipped around, her heart pounding. Stefan's landlady stood at the far end of the hall, a small, stooped figure, all in black.

"Mrs. Flowers," Elena said desperately, going toward her. "Someone was in Stefan's room. Did you see anyone?"

Mrs. Flowers was wise, and her magic was incredibly strong. But now the frail old lady looked at her warily, with no sign of recognition, and Elena remembered with dismay that, in this time, they had never met before.

"The message is for Stefan," Mrs. Flowers said clearly, in a slightly singsong voice, as if she was reciting from memory. Elena's heart sank further. Damon must have compelled her to let him in and deliver his message.

"I'm here," Stefan said from behind Elena. "Give me the message." He looked furious, still, but intensely weary. It was as if all the years, all the centuries, were catching up with him all at once.

"Damon says that you've taken something of his, and so he will take everything you have," Mrs. Flowers said, her face impassive. "Your precious things are his now."

"I never belonged to him," Elena said indignantly. "And I don't belong to Stefan. I'm not a *thing*."

But Mrs. Flowers, her message delivered, was already drifting back into her private part of the house, her long black shawl fluttering behind her.

Stefan's jaw was clenched tight, his fists balled and his green eyes dark. Elena didn't think she had ever seen him so angry, not in all the years she had known and loved him.

If, as Elena thought, Stefan and Damon carried each other's humanity ... if

it was the love between the brothers that was the key to Elena being able to change Damon and save them all ...

If all these things were true, Elena couldn't help feeling like she might have already lost.



The next day, Elena hurried out of class and was the first one at her lunch table. The fire department had just declared that this wing of the school safe, and this was the first day they could eat in the cafeteria instead of outside. A smell of smoke still lingered here, though, and there were streaky gray stains of smoke on the walls and ceiling.

The morning had passed in a haze as she obediently went through the motions of being a high school student without hearing a word that was said. She thought that she might have taken a test in one of her classes, but she wasn't sure which class or what the test had asked. She couldn't think of anything that mattered less at this point in her life.

Maybe, she thought, staring down at her own nervously tapping fingers, her friends would be able to help after all. Elena was still determined not to tell them the truth about what Stefan and Damon were. They had all, Matt and Meredith especially, given up so much in Elena's real world. But, even without knowing all the facts, perhaps her friends could be her eyes and ears in Fell's Church. They could help her find Damon.

If she could just speak to Damon face-to-face, maybe Elena could talk some sense into him. She couldn't believe that he wouldn't come around. Deep down, Damon loved his brother. Elena was sure of it.

Caroline paused by the table. "All alone, Elena?" she asked, poisonously sweet.

Elena glanced up, and a sarcastic reply died on her lips. Around Caroline's pretty bronzed throat was wrapped a gauzy green scarf. Below it peeked out the edge of a telltale purpling bruise.

"What happened to your neck, Caroline?" she asked, her mouth dry.

Caroline sneered. "I don't know what you're talking about. Everything's wonderful." Turning on her heel, she walked away from Elena's table, her head held high.

Elena pressed a hand to her chest, trying to calm her pounding heart. First

Meredith, then Caroline. Damon wanted Elena to know that he knew who the people around her were, that he could get to anyone that mattered to her.

“You okay, Elena?” Matt had stopped at her table. He grinned at her, solid and reassuring in his letterman’s jacket.

Elena flinched. Beneath the collar of Matt’s jacket, she could see a bite, angry purple with two darker marks in the center.

“What’s that?” she asked, dazedly.

Matt raised his hand, brushing his fingers lightly across his neck just where the top of his shirt ended. For a moment, his face clouded, faintly puzzled, and then it cleared. “Everything’s wonderful,” he said slowly, then turned his back on Elena and walked away.

The same thing Caroline had said: *Everything’s wonderful*. Damon had compelled them to say exactly those words and walk away. A hot flush of anger spread through Elena.

“It’s only October, and I’m already so sick of school I could scream,” Bonnie said, clattering her tray down on the table. “When am I really going to use Spanish anyway?”

“When you go to Mexico? Or talk to someone who speaks Spanish?” Meredith suggested dryly. “It might actually be one of the more useful subjects you take.”

Bonnie clicked her tongue irritably as they sat down, but didn’t argue. “Hey, Elena.”

Elena greeted them distractedly. Meredith had another scarf looped around her neck, this one white with threads of sparkling silver woven through it. It covered the bite mark Elena had seen earlier, but she knew it was there.

Bonnie ... Bonnie was fine. She was wearing a V-necked sweater, her slender white throat fully visible and completely unmarked. Elena looked carefully at Bonnie’s wrists to see if Damon had fed from her veins there instead, but there was nothing to see but a braided bracelet and a thin gold watch.

“Elena, are you hearing a thing I say?” Meredith asked sharply. As Elena looked up, Meredith’s expression of irritation softened to concern. “What’s wrong?”

Elena straightened up and gave her a reassuring smile. “Nothing. I’m just distracted. What are we talking about?”

“We need to go to the warehouse at the lumberyard and finish planning out the Haunted House this afternoon,” Meredith said patiently. “I know we still have the plans from last year, but this is our senior year. We should make it really special.”

“Doing it there like we’ve always done will make things much easier. It would have been a huge hassle if we had to do it in the gym instead like the school board was talking about,” Bonnie said. “It’s, like, five hundred feet shorter. Yay for the fire, I guess.”

The first time around—when Elena had been chairman of the decorating committee, instead of Meredith—the school board *had* made them set up the Haunted House in the gym. They’d been worried by the attack on the homeless man under Wickery Bridge and thought everyone would be safer at school instead of at the lumberyard.

It was good that would be changing this time, she thought. If it were in a different place, were things less likely to happen the same way? Maybe.

Meredith pulled out her planning notebook, and she and Bonnie were quickly absorbed in the pictures and sketches from the previous year’s Haunted House. Elena’s eyes wandered back to Bonnie’s unmarked throat.

It just didn’t make *sense*, she thought. If Damon was being thorough enough to go after everyone important to Elena—and Caroline was important to her, Elena admitted to herself, even if they didn’t like each other—then why hadn’t he fed from Bonnie?

Maybe he just hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

“I think we should have druids,” Bonnie was saying.

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea—” Meredith said, and Elena interrupted.

“Bonnie, have you seen Damon lately?” she asked abruptly. “The guy who brought me to school that day?” *Why* had he not bitten Bonnie?

“The one who saw her kissing Stefan,” Meredith said unhelpfully.

Bonnie flushed, right up to her hairline, and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I meant to tell you,” she blurted. “Only it was really weird, and I didn’t want you to feel bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was at the grocery store the other night picking up milk for my mom, and he came up and started talking to me.” Bonnie looked down, pushing her hair shyly behind her ear. “He was looking into my eyes and saying, just,

really weird stuff. Like that I *wanted to be close to him*. I didn't want to tell you because it felt like he was hitting on me." She glanced up at Elena, looking guilty. "I didn't do anything, I swear."

"I believe you," Elena said soothingly, trying to think. Why would Damon have let Bonnie go? It certainly sounded like he had started to compel her; why would he have changed his mind?

Bonnie and Damon had always had a special bond. He called her his redbird, and was protective, treating her almost like a little sister. But, no, that wasn't true *here*. Damon didn't know Bonnie well enough to care about her, not yet.

Elena looked at Bonnie's white throat again, at her slender wrists, checking once more for bites and bruises she knew she wasn't going to find.

Bonnie's wrists ... Elena leaned forward, frowning. The narrow woven bracelet around Bonnie's left wrist was made of thin strips of leather and bits of colored thread and small silver beads. And strands of some kind of plant. Was it *vervain*?

"Where'd you get that bracelet?" Elena asked her.

Bonnie stretched her left arm out to look at it. "I know, it's kind of ugly, isn't it? My grandmother gave it to me this summer, though, and she told me never to take it off. It's supposed to protect me against all kinds of things."

"Because she and your cousin and you are all psychic." Meredith said teasingly.

Bonnie shrugged. "It's all about the druids. Which is why we should have them in the Haunted House. For one thing, they did human sacrifice, and we could have, like, a standing stone and a big knife ... Elena? Where are you going?"

Elena wasn't listening anymore. Without even thinking about it, she stood up from the table and walked out first the cafeteria doors and then the doors of the school. No one stopped her as she strode between the temporary trailer classrooms and through the parking lot.

She felt hot and angry, fuming as she stomped down the sidewalk away from the school. Damon had attacked Meredith. Matt. Even Caroline. And he'd tried to feed on Bonnie as well.

Bonnie was safe. For now. As long as she didn't take that bracelet off and Damon didn't decide that just grabbing her and feeding off her without first

compelling her was just as good.

Elena had kissed Stefan *once*. Once. And her friends had had nothing to do with it.

She was tired of playing games.

When she reached the graveyard, Elena hesitated for a moment, staring through the fence. The day was cloudy, and the cemetery looked gray and gloomy. Beyond the ruined church, she could see the branches of the uprooted tree, pointing skyward.

As she passed through the gate, a cold wind began to blow, whistling in Elena's ears and whipping her hair against her face. She turned toward the well-kept, modern part of the cemetery with its neat rows of granite and marble tombstones. For this confrontation, Elena instinctively felt that it would be comforting to have her parents nearby.

The cemetery was empty and still. As Elena crossed it, the wind came with her, piles of dry leaves rising up into the air as she passed. She stopped by her parents' grave and rested a hand on the cool gray granite of their stone, gathering her strength. "Help me, Mom and Dad," she murmured. Anger was still simmering inside her, black and hot.

Elena spun around, searching between the headstones. She knew he was there, somewhere, watching her. It didn't matter that the bond between them had been severed, she could *feel* him.

She gathered her breath and shouted, into the wind. "*Damon!*"

Nothing. A memory of doing this once before had her turning on the spot, looking over her own shoulder, only to see no one there.

"Damon!" she shouted again. "I know you're there!"

Icy wind blew straight into Elena's face, making her flinch. When she opened her eyes, she found herself staring across the graveyard at a grove of beech trees, their leaves bright yellow and red against the grayness of the sky. Something dark moved in the shadows between their trunks.

Elena blinked. The blackness was coming closer, its shape resolving into a black-clad figure. Golden leaves blew around him, parting as he stepped forward to the edge of the grove, and his pale features became clearer.

Damon, of course.

He stayed where he was, watching Elena calmly as she hurried toward him. She almost slipped in the grass, catching herself against a tombstone, and heat

rose in her cheeks. She didn't want to seem vulnerable in front of Damon. Whatever game he was playing, she would need all the advantages she could get.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped when she reached him, slightly out of breath.

Damon flashed her a bright, insincere smile. "I came when you called, Princess," he said. "I could ask you the same thing. Everything's wonderful." He hissed the words, his lips curling into a cruel smile, the same words he'd primed Matt and Caroline and probably Meredith with, and her anger flared up, hot inside her. Elena's hand flew out and she slapped Damon hard across the face.

Her hand stung with the force of the blow, and Damon's cheek reddened, but he was still smiling. "Don't push me too hard, Elena," he said softly. "I've been kinder than you deserve."

"You've been feeding on my friends," she said, her voice shaking.

Damon's eyes glittered, so black she couldn't tell the iris from the pupil. "Not just feeding on them, Elena. I've got big plans."

Elena went cold inside. "What do you mean?"

Damon's smile disappeared. "The way I fell for you so quickly ... It made me realize how lonely I must be."

Elena's heart thumped hard. Damon didn't do vulnerable, didn't admit to having emotions. Could this be a *good* thing?

But Damon went on, lightly. "And so, I decided what I needed were some protégés."

"You can't do that," Elena said. Damon had never turned anyone into a vampire, never, to her knowledge, even offered to turn anyone except Elena herself. He wasn't looking for companionship; this was pure spite.

"Oh, I can," Damon said. "I think Halloween will be an appropriate day to do it, don't you? It's a very American holiday, of course, but I've always liked costumes. Ghosts and ghouls and all sorts of ghoulies."

"Damon," Elena said. "*Don't.*"

She could hear the pleading tone in her own voice, and so could Damon. His smile reappeared, flashing sharp and bright and quickly disappearing again.

“They’ll thank me,” he said softly, “when they realize they’ll be young and beautiful forever.” His eyes ran over her, pausing on the bite mark Stefan had left low on her throat. When he spoke again, his voice was laced with bitterness. “I’d invite you to join us, Elena, but you’ll have Stefan for that.”

Elena stepped closer. “I’m not with Stefan,” she said, her words tumbling over one another. “I was never with Stefan, Damon. We kissed *once*, that’s it, and that was a mistake. The only reason he fed on me was so that we could get out of the tomb *you* locked us into.”

Damon’s mouth tightened. He looked as disturbingly handsome as ever, but there was something bitter and distrustful in his face. “I’ll see you on Halloween, Elena,” he said, and then he was gone.

Elena stood alone in the cemetery, surrounded by strangers’ graves.

She swallowed once, hard, and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes for a moment.

Damon wanted to change Matt, Meredith, and Caroline—and who knew who else—into vampires on Halloween. Elena had to stop him. And she needed to stop him from killing Mr. Tanner that same night. She didn’t know how she was going to do it alone.

Stefan was clever and strong. If he drank her blood, he’d have more Power, maybe enough to stop Damon.

But no. Elena discarded the idea as swiftly as it had come to her. Stefan had been so angry at Damon when he realized Damon had stolen his treasures. All the conflict, all the resentment that had lain between the brothers since the days of Katherine, 500 years before, had simmered behind Stefan’s green eyes, ready to boil over. If she brought him up against Damon now, Stefan might lose his head and attack. And then there was a good chance that Damon might kill him.

But thinking of the brothers’ shared past had given Elena an idea. Straightening her sweater and squaring her shoulders, she turned and began walking back toward school, leaves crunching beneath her feet.

She needed magic.

* * *

Despite all that had happened since she left the cafeteria, Elena was only a few minutes late for history class. Murmuring an apology to the teacher, she ignored the curious gazes of her classmates. Pulling a sheet of loose-leaf paper out of her backpack, she bent her head over her desk and wrote a note.

SOS. I need your help. Meet me at your house after school. TELL NO ONE!!!

Folding the note and passing it to a girl to her right, Elena jerked her head toward Bonnie's front-row seat, and the girl obediently passed it forward. Elena watched as Bonnie glanced up to make sure Mr. Tanner's eyes were elsewhere, unfolded the note, read it, and then scribbled a reply.

When it came back to Elena, Bonnie's rounded handwriting read,

Can't! We have to go to the warehouse to plan the Haunted House, remember? Meredith would kill us!!!

Mr. Tanner's attention was fixed on a boy answering a question on the other side of the room, and Elena took the chance to grimace appealingly at Bonnie, trying to express urgency in her face. Bonnie, twisted around in her seat, shook her head.

Elena quickly wrote another note and passed it back up to Bonnie.

You have to meet me. I have so much to tell you.

Bonnie, you're a witch.



“Are you serious about all this?” Bonnie asked. “I’m not going to be mad if you were kidding, Elena.” She hefted one of the bags Mrs. Flowers had given them over her shoulder and stepped carefully over a broken gravestone.

Elena had told Bonnie everything. About Stefan and Damon, about coming here from a possible future. About how Bonnie would grow into one of the most powerful witches Elena had ever met. How much Elena needed her help.

Telling Bonnie was the only thing she could think of to do. Matt and Meredith had been hurt too much by their association with the supernatural to bring them into this. Stefan would have been the worst person imaginable to pit against Damon right now.

But Bonnie? In the future, Bonnie was happy. And she was amazingly full of Power. If only they could tap into that Power now, use Bonnie’s magic even though she was completely untrained, Bonnie could be a true asset.

It hadn’t been easy. At first, Bonnie had shaken her head, her large brown eyes wide, and backed away from Elena nervously. The step from saying she was psychic and could read palms to being told she was a budding witch had almost been too much for her. Even now, she was sneaking dubious, worried glances out of the corner of her eye at Elena. But she was here. She wasn’t running away.

Mrs. Flowers had been a surprisingly huge help. She had stood in the doorway of her big old house, listening silently as Elena stumbled through an explanation that really explained nothing. It boiled down to the fact that they knew Mrs. Flowers was a witch, and that they needed help opening something.

“And protecting ourselves,” Elena had tossed in, almost as an afterthought.

Mrs. Flowers sharp eyes examined first Elena, then Bonnie. After a while, she had simply turned and walked away.

“Uh,” Bonnie had said, peering down the dark hall after the old woman. “Are we supposed to follow her?”

Despite everything, Elena could feel a smile curling at the edges of her lips. “It’s just the way she is. She’ll come back.”

They’d waited what felt like forever at Mrs. Flowers’s door, long enough that Bonnie began casting dubious looks at Elena again and Elena began to worry about what she would do if Stefan came home and saw them there.

But Mrs. Flowers had returned eventually, carrying two duffle bags, and spoke for the first time since Elena had asked her for help. “You’ll find things labeled in there, dear. And good luck getting back where you belong.”

“Thank you—” Elena began to say, but the heavy doors were already swinging shut, leaving Elena and Bonnie on the doorstep. She frowned, confused. How had Mrs. Flowers known this wasn’t where Elena belonged?

“Pretty weird,” Bonnie had said, shaking her head. But she had actually seemed slightly less freaked out after that, as if she found it comforting that Elena wasn’t the only possibly crazy person around.

Now they crossed the older part of the graveyard, staggering a little under the weight of the duffle bags Mrs. Flowers had given them. Bonnie hesitated in the empty hole that had once been the doorway of the ruined church.

“Are we allowed in here?” she asked. “Is it safe?”

“Probably not,” Elena told her, “but we have to go in. Please, Bonnie.”

Most of the roof had fallen in and late afternoon sunlight streamed through the holes above them, illuminating piles of rubble. Three walls still stood, but the fourth was knee-high, and Elena could see the far end of the graveyard through it. The uprooted tree, its branches brushing the walls of the small mausoleum Damon had trapped her and Stefan in, still lay there in ruins.

At the side of the church was the tomb of Thomas and Honoria Fell, a large stone box, heavy marble figures carved on its lid. Elena walked over to gaze down on the founders of Fell’s Church, lying with hands folded across their chests, their eyes closed. Elena brushed her fingers across Honoria’s cold marble cheek, taking comfort from the face of the lady who had guarded Fell’s Church for so long. Her ghost hadn’t appeared this time. Did that mean she trusted Elena to handle the situation? Or was something preventing her from coming?

“Okay,” Elena said, all business, as she swung around to face Bonnie. “We have to get the tomb open.”

Bonnie’s eyes rounded. “Are you kidding me?” she asked. “That’s what

you want to open? Elena, it's got to weigh about a thousand pounds. We can't open that with herbs and candles. You need a bulldozer or something."

"We can," Elena said steadily. "You have the Power, Bonnie."

"Even if we could"—Bonnie's voice wobbled—"what would be the point? Elena, there are *dead people* in that thing."

"No," Elena said, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the gray stone box. "It's not really a grave. It's a passageway."

They rummaged through the duffle bags. "Here," Elena said, pulling out two little red silk bags, each on a long loop of cord. "Mrs. Flowers gave us sachets for protection. Put it around your neck." The tiny bag was round and fat with herbs, fitting comfortably in the palm of Elena's hand.

"What's in them?" At Elena's shrug, Bonnie sniffed the sachet before stringing it around her neck. "Smells good, anyway."

There were small jars of herbs, labeled in Mrs. Flowers' crabbed, almost illegible handwriting. "It says these are cowslips," Elena said, making out the label on a jar of small dried yellow flowers, several blossoms on each stem. "According to the label, they're good for unlocking."

Bonnie leaned against her and looked down at the jar in Elena's hand. "Okay. So what do we do with them?"

Elena stared at her. *What would Bonnie, my Bonnie, do?* She tried to think.

"Well, when you're doing a spell that uses herbs, you usually scatter them around what you're working on," she said. "Or you burn them."

"Right. Well, I'd rather not set the church on fire, so let's try scattering them," Bonnie said dryly.

As well as the cowslips, there were jars of prickly dried evergreen needles and dried berries labeled JUNIPER—FOR SPELLCASTING and an herb Elena recognized as rosemary, the label of which claimed it was used for luck and power. Mrs. Flowers had given them several small jars of each, so there was more than enough to strew thoroughly over the lid of the tomb and in a circle around it.

Help us, Elena thought fervently as she sprinkled rosemary over Honoria Fell's grave. *If this works, we'll be protecting Fell's Church. Just like you wanted.*

"Now what?" Bonnie asked, when they'd scattered all the herbs. "There are candles in the other bag, and matches. And a flashlight. And, yikes, a knife."

There were twelve candles, four each of black, white, and red. Mrs. Flowers hadn't included any kind of note to tell them what the colors meant or what exactly to do with them, so Elena, hoping she was doing the right thing, decided to put them in a circle, colors alternating, around the tomb, outside the circle of herbs.

"And what do we do next?" Bonnie asked, watching as Elena lit the last candle.

"I'm not sure," Elena told her, dripping a pool of candle wax on the floor and carefully sticking the candle upright in it. "Usually, you say something, maybe just saying what you want to happen, and it looks like you're concentrating."

Bonnie's eyebrows shot up. "So the next step is that I say 'open' and *think really hard*? Elena, I'm not sure this is going to work."

"Try it," Elena said hopefully.

Bonnie frowned at the tomb. The flames of the candles danced, reflected in her eyes. "Open," she said firmly.

Nothing happened.

"Open. I command you to open." Bonnie said, more doubtfully, and closed her eyes, scrunching her forehead in concentration. Still, nothing changed.

Bonnie's eyes opened and she huffed in frustration. "This is ridiculous."

"Wait." Elena thought of the knife, still in the bag. "Sometimes, you use blood. You say it's important, that it's one of the strongest ingredients you can use in a spell. Because it's vitality, it's life in its most basic form." She hurried toward the bag and felt inside. The knife was more like a small dagger, its blade pure silver and its handle some kind of bone.

Bonnie hesitated, biting her lip, and then nodded. She came to stand beside Elena, her eyes fixed on the knife.

"I'll go first, okay?" Elena said. She made a short, shallow cut on the inside of her own arm, hissing a little at the stinging pain. Turning her arm, she let the blood drip across Honoria and Thomas Fell's effigies. Splotches of her blood stained their lips, the lids of their closed eyes. Blood dripped on Honoria's neck and trickled down, making it look as if she'd been a vampire's feast.

Please, Elena thought, breathing hard. *Please let us in*. She wasn't sure who she was begging: Honoria Fell; the mysterious Powers that filled the

universe; the Celestial Guardians; or Katherine, down below the church. Whoever was listening, she supposed. Whoever would help her.

Bonnie, white-faced but resolute, held out her own arm, and Elena ran the blade quickly across it, watching the blood spill out and over Bonnie's porcelain-white skin. More blood splattered over Honoria and Thomas's stone torsos and their folded hands.

"Draw on your Power, Bonnie," Elena said softly. "It's there. I've seen it. Pull it out of the earth under your feet and the plants growing all around us. Take it from the dead; they're right here with us."

Bonnie's face tightened with concentration, her fine bones becoming more defined beneath her skin. The candle flames flickered, all at once, as if a wind had passed through the ruined church.

Elena wasn't a Guardian here, and she didn't have those Powers anymore. But she could remember what it had felt like when she and Bonnie worked together, their auras combining, feeding her Power into Bonnie's. She tried to find that feeling, pushing out, trying to let Bonnie take whatever might help her. Her hand found Bonnie's smaller one, and Bonnie twined their fingers together and squeezed hard.

All at once, the candles all went out. With a huge, grating cracking noise, the top of the stone tomb split in half, one side falling heavily to the flagstones of the floor.

Elena peered down. As she had expected, there was no grave beneath the stone. Instead of bones, she was looking down into the dark opening of a vault. In the stone wall below her were driven iron rungs, like a ladder.

"Wow." Bonnie said next to her. She was pale, but her eyes were shining with excitement. "I can't believe that worked. I *can't* ..." She closed her mouth, then cleared her throat and lifted her chin bravely. "What now?"

"Now you go home," Elena said. She looked nervously out the broken wall of the church. It was still daylight, but the sun was sinking low. She pulled the flashlight out of the bag and tucked it into her back pocket. "I'm sorry, Bonnie, and *thank you*, thank you so much. But the next part I have to do by myself. And I'm not sure if it's safe for you up here. Please go home before it gets dark."

"If it's not safe for me, it's not safe for you," Bonnie said stubbornly. "At least I can watch your back."

Elena squeezed her friend's hand. "Please, Bonnie," she begged again. "I

can't do what I have to do if I'm worrying about you. I promise I'll be okay."

She knew she had no way of guaranteeing that, but Bonnie's shoulders slumped in acceptance. "Be careful, Elena," she said. "Call me as soon as you get home."

"Okay." Elena watched as Bonnie picked up the duffle bags with their depleted jars of herbs and left the church, casting worried glances back at Elena over her shoulder.

Once Bonnie's small, upright figure was out of sight, Elena took a deep breath. There was an icy breeze coming from the opening in the tomb, and it smelled like earth and cold stone that never saw the light.

Steeling herself, she swung her legs over the edge of the tomb, took hold of an iron rung, and began to climb down into the vault beneath the church.



Elena climbed down into darkness, the iron rungs cold in her hands. By the time her feet hit the stone floor at the bottom of the ladder, she was in total blackness. Pulling the flashlight from her back pocket, she flicked it on and ran the beam of light over her surroundings.

The opening of the crypt was just as Elena remembered it. Smooth stone walls held heavy carved candelabras, some with the remains of candles still in them. Near Elena was an ornate wrought-iron gate. Pushing the gate open, Elena walked forward with a slow, steady tread, trying to calm her hammering heart.

The last time she had been here, she'd been a vampire, and she'd had Damon and Stefan both with her, as well as her human friends. More important, that time she hadn't known what she was getting into. Only that she had been led down here, and that something terrible lurked, just out of sight.

Now Elena knew exactly what was down here.

Her steady footsteps echoed against the stone floor, their sounds only emphasizing how silent it was. Elena could easily believe that no one else had been down here for more than a hundred years. No one else alive, anyway.

Beyond the gate, the beam of the flashlight caught on pale, familiar marble features. A tomb, the twin of the one up in the church. The stone lid here had been broken in two also, and the pieces flung across the crypt. Fragile human bones were splintered and strewn sticklike across the floor. One crunched beneath Elena's feet as she approached, making her wince guiltily.

She had hoped that, since Katherine hadn't appeared in Fell's Church, hadn't sent disturbing dreams to torment Elena, it meant she wasn't so filled with rage in this time. But the violence with which the tomb had been desecrated seemed to prove that Katherine was as furious and destructive as she had ever been.

Elena turned the thin wavering beam of the flashlight to the wall beyond

the Fells' tomb. There, as she'd known there would be, lay a gaping hole in the stone wall, as if the stones had been ripped away. From it, a long black tunnel led deep into the earth beyond.

Elena licked her lips nervously. Resting her hands on the cold moist dirt at the edge of the tunnel, she peered into it. "Katherine?" she said questioningly. Her voice came out softer and shakier than she had meant it to, and she cleared her throat and called again. "*Katherine!*"

Straining her eyes to see into the darkness, Elena waited.

Nothing. No sound of footfalls, nothing white coming swiftly toward her. No sense of something huge and dangerous rushing at her.

"Katherine!" she called again. "I have secrets to tell you!" That might bring her if anything would; Katherine von Swartzchild, first love of Damon and Stefan, the one who had made them vampires and turned them against each other was nothing if not curious and eager for information. That was why she had followed Stefan and Damon here, why she had spied on Elena.

Elena waited, watching and listening. Still nothing. She felt her shoulders sag. Without Katherine, she didn't have a plan at all.

How long should she wait? Elena pictured herself sitting against the wall, surrounded by the Fell's broken bones, waiting for Katherine, growing colder and colder as the light of the flashlight dimmed. Elena shuddered. No, she wouldn't stay here.

She turned to go, and the beam of the flashlight landed on Katherine, standing only a few feet behind her. Elena jumped backward with a strained yelp, her light skittering wildly across the crypt.

Katherine looked so much like Elena that it knocked Elena breathless, even now. Her golden hair was perhaps a shade lighter and a few inches longer, her eyes a slightly different blue. Her figure was thinner and more fragile than Elena's: Girls of her time and class had been expected to sit and embroider, not run and play.

But the delicate curve of Katherine's brow, her long golden lashes, her pale skin, the shape of her features—they were all as familiar to Elena as looking in a mirror. Unlike Elena, who was dressed in jeans and a sweater, Katherine wore a long, gauzy white dress. It would have made her look innocent, if it weren't for the brownish-red streaks across the front, as if Katherine had absent-mindedly wiped bloody hands on it.

"Hello, pretty little girl, my sweet reflection," Katherine said, almost

crooning.

Elena swallowed nervously. "I need your help."

Katherine came closer, touching Elena's hair, running cold fingers across her face. "You're a nasty, greedy girl," she said sharply. "You want both my boys."

"You wanted them, too," Elena snapped, not bothering to deny it. Katherine smiled, her teeth disturbingly sharp.

"Of course I did," she said. "But they're mine. They've always been mine. You should have left them alone."

"I *am* going to leave them alone from now on," Elena said. "I promise. I just want them to be brothers. I want them to be happy. You did too once."

Katherine had, Elena knew, let both brothers drink her blood, promised them each eternal life with the secret idea that they would love each other, that the three of them could be a happy family, together forever. When they had rejected the idea of sharing her, she faked her own death, sure their mutual grief would bring them together.

She'd been a fool. Damon and Stefan had loathed each other already, distanced by their competition for their father's love, by their roles as the good and bad sons. Jealousy over Katherine had only heightened their dislike, and their anger and grief at her death had ripened it into hatred.

Katherine had expected Stefan and Damon to turn to each other, but instead they had turned *on* each other, swords in hand. Each murdered at his brother's hand, they'd died with Katherine's blood in their systems, and risen again, vampires, cursed forever.

"They don't want to be happy." Katherine's eyes widened with remembered hurt, and for a moment, Elena saw the fragile, naïve girl who had destroyed Damon and Stefan with a mistaken idea of romance. "I gave them a gift. I gave them life forever, and they didn't care. I told them to take care of each other, in my memory, but they wouldn't listen. They threw everything I'd given them away."

"But maybe it's not too late," Elena said. "Maybe if they knew you were alive, they could forgive each other."

Katherine's eyes narrowed angrily, her lips curling into a sulky pout. "I don't want them to forgive each other," she said in a childish voice. Then she began to smile, an unpleasant, hungry smile. "You, on the other hand ..." She

stroked Elena's cheeks. Her hands were terribly cold, and they smelled of the earth around them. Elena shivered. "We look so much alike," Katherine said musingly. "I should make you like me. We could travel together. It would be such fun. Everyone would think we were sisters."

There was something wistful in Katherine's eyes as her hand shifted to run through Elena's hair, pulling a little at the long strands. Maybe family was what Katherine needed. She'd lost her father when she'd lost the Salvatores and fled Italy. Would knowing she had other family make a difference to Katherine?

"We are sisters," she said, and Katherine's hand pulled away.

"I don't know what you mean, little one," Katherine said. "You're no sister of mine."

Elena swallowed, feeling the dry click of her throat. "We really are. My mother—your mother—was an immortal. A Celestial Guardian. She left you to keep you safe. And when, hundreds of years later, she tried to keep me safe, the other Guardians killed her."

Katherine's mouth tightened into an angry line. "That doesn't make any sense. My mother died when I was a baby."

"No, it's true," Elena said simply. There was nothing but hostility in Katherine's face, but Elena pushed on. "I ask you, as your own flesh and blood, to help me. You wanted to be the one to bring Stefan and Damon together, and you still can be. They need you, Katherine. Five hundred years, and they've never stopped loving you. It's torn them apart."

Katherine's face was blank and cold. "They deserve to suffer." She squeezed her fists tightly, slamming her arms down at her sides. "They'll suffer if I kill you. Or if I take you with me."

"No." Elena took Katherine's cold, muddy arm, her heart pounding. "They've suffered all along. You can *save* them this time. You're the only one who can."

Hissing, Katherine pulled away. With a rattling noise, the crypt began to shake around them. Despite herself, Elena shrieked as the lid to the tomb fell to the floor with a crash, Honoria Fell's face cracking. Another tremor had Elena stumbling and grabbing onto the stone wall to keep from falling.

"Stop it!" she demanded, glaring at Katherine. The other girl stood stock-still, her pale face tilted up as if she could see through the dirt and stone to the ruined church above. From high above, Elena heard a heavy thud, and

Katherine's lips curled in a joyless smile.

Elena ran. Her heart pounding, she shoved through the half-open gate and down the long dark corridor, her flashlight swinging wildly. She didn't look back, but her nerves were on edge, listening for a footstep, waiting for Katherine's inhumanly strong hands to clamp down upon her shoulders and drag Elena back.

Katherine could kill her, could turn Elena into a vampire if she wanted to, and there was nothing Elena would be able to do about it. Why had Elena tried to reason with her?

Grabbing hold of the iron rungs set in the wall, Elena began to pull herself up as fast as she could, her breath coming fast and anxious. The crypt had stopped shaking, for now, but her hands, sweaty with nerves, still slipped as she climbed. Partway up, she lost her grip on the flashlight and it fell, crashing into the stones below and going out, leaving Elena in darkness. Far above was the faintly lit rectangle of the tomb in the church, and Elena kept climbing toward it as fast as she could, holding tightly onto the rungs.

At last Elena reached the top and scrambled out through the Fells' tomb, gulping deep breaths of the cold fresh air. Once she was standing on the floor of the old church, she dared to glance down into the crypt below.

There was nothing there, no white-clad figure following her. But that proved nothing. Katherine could take many forms, and she was much, much faster than Elena. Elena's best chance, she thought, would be to cross Wickery Bridge and head home as quickly as she could. Katherine was powerful enough that she had trouble crossing running water.

The sun had set and night had fallen while Elena was down in the crypt. *Terrific*, she thought, *a cemetery after dark without a flashlight and a vampire on my heels. This was a truly genius idea, Elena Gilbert.*

She stumbled over what seemed to be every tombstone in the long grass of the older part of the graveyard, once falling hard enough to skin the palms of her hands. Elena scrambled up and hurried on, finding her way by the light of the half-moon above her.

Once she reached the road outside the cemetery, the tight ball of anxiety in Elena's chest relaxed a little. Not much farther until she could cross the bridge and then head back home. She'd have to go back to her own house. Aunt Judith had called someone to fix the window and insisted on moving back home. At least it was closer than Meredith's, but Elena didn't know how to keep them safe from Damon. Perhaps now that he was focusing on her

friends, he would leave Elena's family alone.

Just before the bridge, a white-clad figure barred Elena's path. Katherine's pale gold hair whipped around her in the wind.

Elena glanced back over her shoulder. There was no point in running. Katherine was a thousand times faster than Elena, and the only thing that would hinder her—running water—was on the *other* side of her.

For a moment, Elena thought of begging for mercy. But she knew Katherine well enough to know that wouldn't do any good. Whatever Katherine decided to do, she would do.

Might as well go out fighting. Elena tossed her head back and marched straight up to Katherine. "What do you want?" she asked.

Katherine's cold blue eyes regarded Elena for a long moment. Finally, she spoke. "You think that I can save them? I'll do as you ask, little mirror. I will let Damon and Stefan know that I still live."

"Oh." Maybe Elena's pleading had done some good after all. "Thank you."

Katherine frowned at her crossly. For a moment, her voice sounded young, a hurt child's, but her eyes seemed terribly old. "There's no happy ending in this for either of us. I hope you know that," she said. "I've lived this once already. I know what it's like to love them both, and to lose them."



Heavy clouds loomed overhead, and the air seemed ominously electric, on the verge of a storm. Outside the Haunted House appeared a devilishly masked mannequin, its black clothing flapping in the wind and giving an appropriately nightmarish ambiance to this Halloween night.

Stefan and Elena stopped outside the Haunted House. Stefan's face was drawn tight, and Elena felt sick and anxious. Pulling up the hood of her Red Riding Hood costume, she carefully covered her distinctive golden hair.

"This is the night Damon said he was going to turn Meredith and Matt and Caroline into vampires," she whispered to Stefan. "He has to be here. They're all here, and there's so much confusion, it will be easy for him."

Stefan nodded grimly. Looking up at him, Elena couldn't help the little clench her heart gave. He looked so good in his tuxedo and cape, elegant and completely natural. A debonair vampire costume, what else? And people thought Stefan didn't have a sense of humor.

She hadn't been completely honest with him. For her plan to work, for the brothers to forgive each other, Katherine's revelation that they hadn't caused her death had to come as a surprise. So she had told him only that they needed to protect her friends from Damon.

"We'll mingle with the crowd and keep an eye out for him," she said as they approached the Haunted House entrance. "If you hang out in the Torture Room, that might be a good place. It shouldn't be too crowded; it's off the main path and it's mostly dummies, not people in costume. It's the kind of place Damon would be likely to take someone if he wanted to be alone."

Despite Elena's defection from the Haunted House committee—which Meredith had only reluctantly forgiven her for—and Bonnie's missing most of the all-important planning stage, Meredith and the rest of her decorating committee had done an amazing job on the Haunted House. It looked nightmarishly creepy, the entrance enthusiastically draped in spider webs and handprints made with fake blood.

Now everything was in chaos as the seniors rushed to get the last pieces in place before the paying public was allowed in. Elena and Stefan ducked through the crowd and made their way along the twisting route of the tour.

Outside the Torture Chamber, Elena squeezed Stefan's hand. "This is it," she said. "Good luck."

"I will protect them if I can, Elena," Stefan told her, and slipped through the doorway to hide inside among the torture implements.

Elena went on, glancing in at the different sets as she passed. The Alien Encounter Room was already dark, lit only with phosphorescent paint, and zombies milled around the Living Dead Room, adjusting one another's makeup.

The Druid Room was near the back of the warehouse, and Elena frowned. If she'd had time to really participate in the committee, maybe she could have made it more central, so that it would be more difficult for Damon to feed from—and kill—Mr. Tanner.

Love is powerful, Mylea had said, but should Elena have paid more attention to logistics and less to changing Damon's heart? She should have made it *impossible* for Damon to kill Mr. Tanner instead of hoping she could make him not want to.

She swallowed hard. This was the right way to go. If she couldn't change the relationship between the brothers, surely it was only a matter of time before Damon killed again. She could only hope that Katherine would pull through, for all their sakes. If it didn't work, maybe there was never any hope for Elena's mission.

And there Mr. Tanner was, upright and indignant, arguing with white-robed Bonnie in front of a cardboard Stonehenge. "But you've *got* to wear the blood," she was saying pleadingly. "It's part of the scene; you're a sacrifice."

"Wearing these ridiculous robes is bad enough," Mr. Tanner told her. "No one informed me I was going to have to smear syrup all over myself."

"It doesn't really get on *you*," Bonnie argued, but Elena had heard enough for now. She remembered this argument. She'd joined in the first time, trying to convince Mr. Tanner to cooperate, and then Stefan had finally compelled him. But Meredith, a witch in a tight black dress, was already approaching, and Elena realized she had faith that Meredith's logic and persistence would be just as effective as Stefan's Power had been.

Both Bonnie and Meredith were focused on Mr. Tanner, not even noticing

Elena, and she hesitated, watching them. Meredith was talking softly and reasonably to Mr. Tanner while Bonnie looked harried but amused, a smile lurking at the edges of her mouth.

Elena's heart ached with how much she loved them. Memories came rushing back to her: Meredith telling ghost stories at their junior high sleepovers, Bonnie's face bright over her ninth birthday cake, the focused frown Meredith wore as she studied, the shine of Bonnie's eyes on her wedding day. Damon wanted to *change* them, destroy their lives, make them unaging killers. She had to stop him.

It was almost time for the Haunted House to open. Time to look for Damon.

The Haunted House was like a maze this time, Elena realized. The warehouse was bigger than the school gym had been, and Meredith had filled the space with many more horrors than they'd been able to fit in the school gym the first time this Halloween had happened, when Elena had been in charge. Elena cut through the Séance Room and the Deaths from History Room, where she spotted Caroline, a nubile Egyptian priestess in a linen shift that left very little to the imagination, talking to Tyler in his werewolf costume. *One potential victim*, she thought, and looked for the others. She would have to keep them all safe.

Slipping between the temporary partitions, Elena cut through the Spider Room, where she had to push her way through dangling rubber spiders. She found Meredith and Bonnie again, and followed as they hurried back toward the entrance, ready to lead customers through the house. Outside the entrance to the fun house, she finally identified Matt, who had taken the head of his own werewolf costume off. *Everyone in place*, she thought, and glanced automatically toward the Torture Chamber.

The last of the seniors were getting in position. The doors were about to open. "Bonnie," Elena said softly, coming up next to her.

Bonnie jumped a little. "Elena," she said. She looked curiously at Elena's costume. "I thought you were going to wear that Renaissance dress your aunt had made for you."

"No, I lent that to someone else," Elena told her. "Bonnie, can you do me a favor? Damon's going to come here, dressed as the Grim Reaper. Be nice to him, okay? Don't let on that you recognize him if you can help it, and steer him toward the Torture Chamber. I'll take it from there."

Bonnie paled, but she nodded. "I'll try," she said, and lowered her voice to

a whisper. “What if he tries to bite me, Elena?”

Elena slipped an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “I don’t think he will, at least not here,” she said comfortingly. “You’ve got your bracelet and Mrs. Flowers’s sachet, so he can’t Influence you, and I don’t think he’ll try anything with this many people around. If he does, just scream as loudly as you can.”

Bonnie didn’t seem terribly comforted, but she nodded again and squared her shoulders. For a moment, she looked to Elena like a young soldier heading into battle. Frightened, but firmly determined to face down death if necessary. Suddenly filled with affection, Elena hugged her friend tightly. “It’ll be all right,” she breathed in Bonnie’s ear. “I promise.” Something twisted inside her, and she hoped, fervently, that she would be able to keep the promise.

A voice sounded through the warehouse. “Okay, they’re about to let in the line. Cut the lights, Ed!” Gloom fell, and, with an audible click, somebody started the recorded sounds of groans and maniacal laughter, so that they resounded through the Haunted House. Letting go of Bonnie, Elena headed for her own chosen spot as the doors opened to let in the crowd.

It took a long time for Damon to appear. From her hiding place behind a particularly gruesome-looking plastic apparatus and agonized dummy in the Torture Room, Elena listened to the shrieks of kids going through the Haunted House and itched with impatience and anxiety.

Stefan paced from one side of the room to the other and hesitated in the doorway, listening carefully. The red light that illuminated the room turned his skin a ghastly shade. Things were coming to a crisis, Elena could see that. Stefan’s jaw was set, and he was kneading the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. He was worried that Damon might be feeding on humans while he and Elena waited in the wrong place. Finally, he straightened, making up his mind, and stepped toward the entrance once more.

Just then, a hooded figure came through the door, black robes sweeping around him. The Grim Reaper regarded Stefan silently for a moment, scythe clutched in front of him, and then he swept back his hood.

“Hello, little brother,” Damon said, showing his teeth in what looked more like a snarl than a smile.

Stefan looked at him gravely. “I’ve been waiting for you, Damon,” he said.

Damon cocked a cynical eyebrow. “Saint Stefan,” he said mockingly.

“Does the lovely Elena want you to make peace? Stop me from making a new family?” He moved closer, resting a hand lightly on Stefan’s shoulder, and Elena saw Stefan flinch. Stefan was, she realized, afraid.

When he spoke, though, his voice was steady. “It’s been a long time since I thought talking to you would do any good, Damon. If you want family, I’m here. All I can do is try to stop you from doing your worst, from doing something you’ll regret.”

Damon’s smile widened. “You stop me, baby brother? All you do is ruin everything, without even trying to.” He pulled Stefan closer, his hand clamping down on Stefan’s shoulder like a vise.

Moving so fast that Elena had no time to react, not even to gasp, he spun Stefan around and slammed him into the wall, sinking his teeth deep into Stefan’s throat. Stefan gave a small choked moan of pain, and Elena flinched. Damon hadn’t taken care, hadn’t bothered to soothe Stefan the way he would have a human. He wanted to this to hurt.

A terrible ripping noise came from the grappling brothers—Damon’s teeth tearing something in Stefan’s throat—and Elena clenched her fists. *This was a stupid plan*, she realized. *Damon’s angry enough to kill Stefan.*

Just as she began to step forward out of her hiding place, a new voice, cool and arrogant, rang out.

“Stop it.” Katherine, her head held high and her mouth thin and angry, was suddenly beside them. Damon lifted his head, his mouth dripping with blood from his brother’s throat, and they both stared at her.

She was wearing the Renaissance dress Aunt Judith had made for Elena’s Halloween costume, and she looked lovely, as delicate and ornate as an expensive doll, just the way she must have looked five hundred years before. The red lighting changed the ice blue of the dress to a pale violet and threw pink shadows on Katherine’s pale face and golden hair.

Elena had thought that Stefan and Damon might mistake Katherine for Elena, just for a second, but it was clear that neither of them had the least doubt about who she was.

“Katherine,” Stefan said. His face was full of mixed emotions. Shock, disbelief, dawning joy, and relief. Fear. “But that’s impossible. It can’t be. You’re dead. ...”

Katherine laughed, a brittle, desperately unhappy laugh. “I wanted you to believe that. Your little human toy, the one who looks so much like me, *she*

figured it out, but you never did.”

“Elena?” Damon asked, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Katherine circled them, head held high. Her long skirts swept the floor with a quiet susurrant, and Damon turned slowly, so that he was always facing her, tense and wary. “Your Elena convinced me to tell you the truth.”

“Tell us then,” Stefan said steadily.

“I wanted us all to be happy,” Katherine said, looking back and forth between Stefan and Damon. Under the red lights, tears glistened on her cheeks. “I loved you. But it wasn’t good enough for you. I wanted you to love each other, but you wouldn’t. I thought if I died, you *would* love each other.”

Elena had heard Katherine’s story before. She let the words wash over her and concentrated on Stefan and Damon’s faces as Katherine unfolded her tale: how she had another talisman against the sun made and given her maid her ring. How the maid had burned fat in the fireplace and filled Katherine’s best dress with it, left it in the sun along with Katherine’s note telling Stefan and Damon she couldn’t bear to be the cause of strife between them. That she hoped that, once she was gone, they would come together.

Katherine’s face was paler than ever, her eyes huge, tears running down her cheeks. The story had taken her back, and it was in the hurt, puzzled voice of the young girl she had been that she exclaimed, “You didn’t listen, and you ran and got swords. You killed each other. *Why?* You made your deaths my fault.”

Stefan’s face was wet with tears, too, and he was as caught up in the memory as she was. “It was my fault, Katherine, not yours. I attacked first,” he said in a choked voice. “You don’t know how sorry I’ve been, how many times I’ve prayed to take it all back. I murdered my own brother. ...”

Damon was watching him intently, his eyes dark and opaque. Elena couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Surely this was what he needed? To know their centuries of enmity had been pointless, that his brother regretted striking that blow and dooming them both?

Stefan turned to him. “Please, Damon,” Stefan said, his voice cracking. “I’m sorry. What we’ve fought about for so long, hated each other over”—he gestured to Katherine—“none of it was real.”

Trembling, Stefan reached a hand toward his brother, and something snapped shut in Damon’s expression. He stepped away as quickly as a cat.

“Well, it’s lovely to know that you’ve survived,” he said, turning to Katherine. His voice sharpened. “But don’t flatter yourself that I’ve spent the last five hundred years pining over you. It’s not about you anymore, Katherine. It hasn’t been, not for a long time.”

As he spoke, his eyes fixed on the spot where Elena was hiding. *He’s known I’m here all along*, she realized. She stepped out from behind the dummy. “Please, Damon,” she began.

But Damon’s face was a mask of fury. “You think this changes anything, Elena? I’m not going to forgive you so you can live happily ever after with my whining weakling of a baby brother. The world is *nothing* but suffering, and the fact that one girl lived when we thought she was dead doesn’t make any difference. This doesn’t change my plans.”

Moving too quickly for their eyes to follow, Damon was gone.



“He’s beautiful,” Katherine said, “but he’s always had that rage inside him. When he was human, I thought it was romantic.”

“We have to stop him,” Elena said to Stefan. “In this mood, he’ll kill anyone who gets in his way.”

“You promised me I would save them,” Katherine said. Her face began to crumble with disappointment. “You said I’d be a hero.”

There was a glimmer of violence in Katherine’s eyes. Elena remembered the white tiger Katherine could become, the cruelty of the Katherine she’d met the first time she’d gone through this. Elena’s lips parted. She had to say something to defuse the situation.

“I want what you wanted for us, Katherine,” Stefan cut in. His face was more open than Elena had seen it in this time. “You sacrificed everything for us, and I won’t forget that. But we have to find Damon before it’s too late. Before your sacrifice was for nothing.”

In a moment of sympathy and understanding, Katherine approached Stefan. Elena saw in Katherine what she’d been feeling for the past few weeks—loss of true love. Katherine pressed her lips to Stefan’s cheek, as gently as a human would. And then in the blink of an eye, Katherine was gone.

“Come on,” Elena said, gripping Stefan by the hand and pulling him out the door of the Torture Chamber. “We have to find him.”

A giggling group of girls pushed past them into the Torture Chamber, and Elena hesitated in the passageway, looking both ways. The Haunted House was teeming with people. Which way would Damon have gone?

Stefan pushed her gently toward her left. “You go that way,” he said grimly. “I’ll work my way back toward the entrance. There are only so many places he could be.”

“Check on the Druid Room first,” Elena said. They needed to make sure he wasn’t anywhere near Mr. Tanner. “We’ll find him, Stefan.”

Of course, we don't know what we'll be able to do if we find him, a nagging voice remarked in the back of Elena's mind. Still, she headed through the maze of rooms, her eyes raking the shadows, looking for the Grim Reaper. There were a lot of people in black-robed costumes, but none of them were Damon.

An engine revved behind her, and Elena was shoved sideways by a shrieking group as a chainsaw-wielding masked man chased them down the hall. She took a turn between two partitions and found herself suddenly alone.

"On your way to Grandma's, Little Red?" someone whispered throatily behind her.

Elena turned to see a werewolf, its mask's muzzle dripping with gruesomely realistic blood. "Matt?" she asked uncertainly.

"Didn't they tell you to stay on the path?" The werewolf's voice got a little louder as he leered at her.

Tyler, Elena realized with disappointment. "Have you seen Matt?" she asked, her voice flat.

"There's more than one wolf in these woods, Little Red," Tyler told her, laying a large, hairy paw on her shoulder.

Elena shrugged it off. "Look, Tyler, I really need to find Matt. Or Meredith," she added. If she knew where they were, maybe she could hide them from Damon.

Tyler scowled. "No, I don't know where they are." He leaned against her, his breath hot on her neck. "Come play with me instead, pretty girl. I'll show you the way to Grandma's house."

"If you see them—or Caroline or Bonnie—tell them I'm looking for them, okay?"

He huffed a sigh. "Whatever." Two girls Elena didn't know turned the corner into the other end of the hall, and Tyler lost interest in Elena. "Full moon, ladies," he shouted, walking toward them, and tipped his head back in a throaty howl as they giggled.

Elena passed through the Spider Room next, but there was no one there but a bunch of rowdy junior-high boys, batting the rubber spiders at each other. The Living Dead Room was teeming with people, one of whom, moaning, "*Braaaaains*," pretended to take a bite out of Elena's face. But there was no black-clad Meredith in a witch costume, no werewolf Matt, no Egyptian

Caroline.

Dread settled in the pit of Elena's stomach. Could Damon have trapped them all in the fated Druid Room? Could Stefan be outnumbered? Bonnie ought to be there too, playing a priestess sacrificing Mr. Tanner. At least she knew where Bonnie was supposed to be.

I told her it was going to be all right, Elena remembered. Half running, she headed for the Druid Room.

Bonnie wasn't there. There was no one poised above the altar, although Elena could hear shrieks and laughter coming from not far away. Strobe lights flashed, giving the whole room a dizzying, dreamlike quality. Beneath the cardboard Stonehenge, Mr. Tanner was stretched out across the sacrificial stone altar, his robes heavily stained with blood, his eyes blankly staring up at the ceiling. Beside him lay the ritual knife in a pool of blood.

The chill in Elena's center hardened into a frightened little ball. She rushed toward him, trying to see if Mr. Tanner was breathing. His eyes were rolled back in his head, showing little more than the whites.

She bent over the still figure, working up the nerve to touch him. "Mr. Tanner?" she said softly. *Too late, too late*, the little voice in the back of her head mourned. If Damon had managed to kill Mr. Tanner, then Elena was dead, Damon was dead, Stefan was dead.

Elena extended a shaking hand, her heart hammering, to touch Mr. Tanner's neck, to feel for a pulse.

Just before her hand made contact, Mr. Tanner sat up. "AAAAARRRRGGGGGHHHH!" he shrieked into her face.

Elena screamed, a thin, high sound of shock and backpedaled away from him, banging her hip hard against the wall. Stiffly, Mr. Tanner lay back down in the same position, his eyes rolling back into his head again. A small, pleased smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

Pressing a hand against her chest, Elena tried to calm her wildly pounding heart. She took a deep breath as it started to sink in: Mr. Tanner was still alive. She hadn't failed. She could still save herself, save them all.

Elena rushed from room to room, looking for the others. She was panting, but she couldn't stop to catch her breath. She had to stop Damon before it was too late.

"Elena." Outside the Mad Slasher Room, Stefan came toward her, his dark clothes and hair blending into the shadows of the hall, only his pale face and white shirtfront standing out clearly. Elena stopped, eager for news. "I found Meredith," he said. "She's up at the front with a lot of other people, taking money."

"She should be safe there," Elena said. "As long as she doesn't head out alone." Meredith was in charge of the whole Haunted House; she could be called into the more isolated recesses of the warehouse at any moment.

Stefan glanced away, a touch of color rising in his cheeks. "I, er, Influenced her to stick with the group instead of wandering off by herself."

"Good thinking," Elena said. "Now we just need to find everyone else."

The Mad Slasher Room was packed and full of noise. A boy with a chainsaw was enthusiastically revving it, chasing screaming victims around the room. Fake blood was grotesquely sprayed across the walls, and less noisy maniacs strangled and hacked at anyone who came close. Elena jumped and shuddered as the laughing, shrieking victims shoved past her.

They were playing at blood and death, and Damon could be anywhere, watching, ready to tear them apart. She felt sick as she tried to make out individual faces and costumes in the crowd.

There was no Grim Reaper, no Egyptian priestess, no werewolf, no Druid.

In contrast, the Alien Encounter Room was quiet when they passed through. Bright beams of light flashed on and off overhead, while a girl stretched out on a table below was poked and prodded by gray alien-looking figures. The girl glanced up and winked at Elena, and Elena realized it was Sue Carson.

No one Elena and Stefan were looking for.

Caroline should have been in the Deaths from History Room, playing with a rubber snake, but she wasn't.

Turning to leave, Elena caught sight of red curls peeking out from under the black hood of a rather short executioner wielding a plastic axe over Anne Boleyn's head. Grabbing hold of the executioner's axe arm, she asked, "Bonnie? What are you doing here?"

"Ray had to go to the bathroom," Bonnie explained, pulling off the hood. Underneath, she looked a little sweaty and disheveled, strands of hair sticking to her forehead. "I said I'd take over for a few minutes."

"Bonnie, Damon's here somewhere," Elena said. "Have you seen Matt or Caroline?"

Bonnie sobered. "Caroline ought to be here," she said. "Everyone's been wondering where she is. The last time I saw Matt was in the Fun House. I'll come with you." She propped the plastic axe against the wall and led the way, Stefan and Elena hurrying after her.

The entrance to the Fun House was concealed behind a long black curtain. As Elena reached to twitch it aside, a hooded figure stepped out, black clothes swirling all around it. Elena jerked backward, her breath catching in her throat.

But the dark figure was too short to be Damon.

"Vickie?" Elena said, peering beneath the hood. "Have you seen Matt or Caroline?"

Vickie frowned, thinking hard. "I can't say," she said.

Beside her, Elena felt Stefan stiffen, turning his full focus onto Vickie. "You can't say?" he asked slowly. "Vickie, can we come into the Fun House?"

"The Fun House is closed," Vickie told them.

"What? No, it's not," Bonnie said, and tried to dodge past her, but Vickie shoved her backward.

"You can't go in there," she said. There was something flat behind Vickie's usually timid brown eyes, and Elena finally figured out what was going on: Damon had compelled Vickie to keep them out.

Stefan wouldn't be able to compel Vickie to let them in—his Power wasn't

as strong as Damon's—but he was stronger than any human. Her eyes met Stefan's green ones, and she knew they were in perfect agreement. He would have to overpower Vickie.

“Hang on,” Bonnie said. Her small hand gripped Elena's, and she pulled on Stefan's arm with her other hand. She tugged them down the hall with her, looking back to smile over her shoulder at Vickie.

“Damon's compelled her,” Stefan said, pulling out of Bonnie's grasp as soon as they turned the corner away from Vickie's gaze. “Caroline or Matt—maybe both of them—must be in the Fun House. There isn't much time.”

“I know,” Bonnie said. “But there's another way into the Fun House.”

Crooking a finger for Elena and Stefan to follow, Bonnie led them to a narrow opening between two partitions and pulled aside a swathe of black cloth. “Duck under here,” she said softly, “and we'll come out on the other end of the Fun House.”

“You're the best, Bonnie,” Elena whispered and ducked under the cloth.

When Elena straightened up, she had to blink and shield her eyes for a moment. Strobe lights were flashing here, too, but far faster and brighter than in the Druid Room, as if they had been turned up to their maximum settings.

In one bright flash of light, Elena saw a twisted face, pale and staring. A corpse. They were too late, she realized, with numb horror. Everything was lost.

“Elena?” Stefan asked. He must have been able to hear the panicked change in her breathing. The lights flashed again and she realized there was no corpse, just her own reflection, distorted by a fun-house mirror.

The mirrors were everywhere. An image of Elena and Bonnie stretched out like rubber bands stood by a reflection of Stefan with an enormous head. Loud carnival music blared all around them.

The whole effect was dizzying, and Elena wanted to shut her eyes, but there was no time. They had to find Damon.

The hall of mirrors curved in front of them, and they couldn't see the other end. Cocking her head to indicate the direction, Elena led Bonnie and Stefan up the hall, stumbling as the lights dimmed, then flashed again.

As they rounded the bend, she saw Damon and Caroline, reflected over and over. There were a hundred Damon and Carolines in the flashes of light, all around her, squashed and bulbous, long and thin, bulging oddly.

In the center, two perfectly beautiful people, one human and one vampire, were locked in what was almost an embrace.

Damon had thrown off his cloak and wore jeans and a black button-down. His head was bent back, exposing his long white throat to Caroline. In one hand, he clasped a dagger loosely—Stefan’s dagger, Elena realized, one of his stolen treasures—and Elena could see that he had made a cut along his breastbone for Caroline to feed from. Her face was pressed against Damon’s chest, and, with a shudder of disgust, Elena realized Caroline was swallowing his blood eagerly.

When Caroline raised her head for a moment, her mouth was red and slick with blood. It dripped down her chin and marked her pure white shirt. Elena recoiled. The girl’s cat-green eyes seemed dazed, and, as she gazed up at Damon adoringly, Elena was quite sure he’d put Caroline heavily under his Power.

“Stay back, Elena,” Stefan said softly.

At the sound of Stefan’s voice, Damon looked up and threw him a dazzling, brief smile. Turning Caroline gently around so that she faced them, he raised his dagger and laid it against her throat. Caroline hung in his grasp, blinking slowly, not seeming to even see them.

“No,” Stefan said. Elena could feel him tensing himself for one desperate run at Damon. And she knew, as surely as if she had seen it, that if Stefan made a move toward him, Damon would cut Caroline’s throat.

“Stop,” she said, her voice breaking. “Everybody, just stop.” She pushed back her own red hood so that she and Damon could see each other more clearly. His eyes held hers, wide and dark, and his lips tipped up in a mocking smile.

“You *need* each other, you and Stefan,” she said. “Why are you trying to make another family when your family is here?”

Damon sneered. “Family. Stefan hasn’t been my family since he stuck a sword through my heart.”

Beside her, Elena felt Stefan stiffen. Then he stepped forward. “There is *nothing* I regret more than that. I killed you. My only brother.” His green eyes were full of tears. “Even if I lived forever, I could never make it up to you.”

Damon stared at him, his handsome face blank.

“Remember how Stefan followed you when you were a child?” Elena

asked. "He'd take a beating from your father rather than ever betray your secrets. He *worshipped* you." She felt Stefan glance at her curiously, wondering how Elena could know that, but it didn't matter now. She kept her attention firmly fixed on Damon.

Was his grip on the dagger pressed to Caroline's throat loosening? Elena wasn't sure.

"Remember Incognita, the beautiful black mare you won playing cards, when you were just sixteen?" Stefan said hoarsely. "That morning when you brought her home, you let me ride behind you, and we went so fast, her hooves hardly touched the ground. We were invincible then. Happy."

Surely the taut line of Damon's mouth was softening, Elena thought. The dagger had slipped a little, resting gently against Caroline's throat as she sagged, half-conscious in Damon's arms. But then Damon tensed again.

"Sentimental tales from the nursery," he scoffed. "Those children have been dead for centuries." He took a fresh grip on the knife.

"It still matters," Elena said desperately. "You're both still *here*. There are only two people left in the world who remember you when you were alive, Damon. Once Stefan is gone, only Katherine will remember, and she's the one who changed you. No one else knows anything but the monster. It's not too late to change that."

Damon hesitated for a split second. "Again with these promises you can't keep. If you want the good brother, you already have him."

Elena shook her head. "No," she said. "This isn't about that. I never had either of you, not in this world."

Damon's forehead creased in a puzzled frown, but Stefan held out his hands to his brother beseechingly, walking slowly toward him. "I never meant to kill you," he said, as softly and soothingly as he would have spoken to a wild animal. "I would spend the rest of my days trying to right that wrong, if you would be my brother again."

There was a long, tense moment. The cheerful, hectic carnival music was at odds with the mood of the room.

In a quick motion, Damon pushed Caroline forward so that she fell onto the floor, landing hard and lying motionless. Bonnie gasped and rushed to her.

Looking past Stefan, Damon's black eyes met Elena's. "I won't turn your friends," he said shortly. His gaze shifted back to Stefan's. "I won't kill you,

either, I suppose. Not now at least.”

There was no embrace between Stefan and Damon, no show of catharsis. But Elena caught a hint of a smile on Damon’s face—a small, private smile Elena had seen before, in the future she left behind. It was a smile Damon only ever gave to his brother.

Joy flooded through her, as if she was filling with sunlight. Mr. Tanner had survived. Bonnie and Meredith and Matt and Caroline—who Bonnie was fussing over now—were still human. Halloween night was almost over.

She was going to have a future. They were all going to live.



“It went really well, don’t you think?” Meredith said, tucking a long lock of dark hair behind her ear and looking up at the closed entrance to the Haunted House.

It was late, but they’d only managed to clear out all the customers about half an hour before. Across the parking lot, the last of the costumed workers were climbing into their cars, laughing and calling good-byes to one another. The heavy clouds that had hung overhead at the beginning of the evening had cleared and now stars shone brightly in the sky.

Elena linked her arms through Bonnie and Meredith’s, pulling her best friends close, and smiled at Matt beside them. “I thought it was amazing.”

Stefan and Damon had disappeared somewhere together shortly after their reconciliation, but that was all right with Elena. She was happy, for now, to have this last time with her oldest, dearest friends.

And it *was* the last time, she was suddenly sure of it. The Guardians hadn’t sent Elena to start over; they had only sent her to change things. There would probably be an Elena here tomorrow, she thought, but she was pretty sure it wouldn’t be her, it wouldn’t be the Elena who had lived this more than once.

She was going to wake up in that Elena’s future, whatever future she had made. And she hoped that Matt, Meredith, and Bonnie would be part of that future somehow, but they wouldn’t be the ones she knew now.

This was good-bye.

“You did such a good job planning the whole thing, Meredith,” Elena said. “It seems like you can do anything you put your mind to. You’re *wonderful*.”

Meredith’s olive cheeks flushed pink. “Thanks,” she said, dipping her head shyly.

They’d reached Matt’s car, and Meredith opened the passenger door and climbed in. As Matt crossed to the driver’s side, Elena hugged him. “You’re one of the best people I know, you know that?” she said. She was choking up

a little. “I *promise* everything will be okay. Remember that.”

Kissing her on the cheek, Matt drew back with a little rueful half smile. “You still have to help us clean up the Haunted House tomorrow,” he told her. Elena just laughed.

As Matt closed the car door behind him, Elena turned to see Bonnie watching her with an affectionate, knowing gaze. “This is it, huh?” she said. She was smiling, but her lips were quivering a little.

“I guess so,” Elena told her.

With a sniff, Bonnie threw herself into Elena’s arms and held her tightly.

“Oh, Scarecrow,” Elena murmured into her friend’s bright curls. “I think I’ll miss you most of all.”

After one tight hug, Bonnie pulled back, swiping a hand quickly under her eyes. “Seven years in the future isn’t that long. You’ll see me then.”

“I hope so,” Elena said. She reached out and took Bonnie’s hand for a moment, squeezing it tightly. She tried to memorize the feeling of Bonnie’s small, strong hand gripping hers.

She would remember this, just in case. She would remember Matt’s open, honest face, and Meredith’s wry smile. Whatever happened, she wouldn’t forget them.

For now, there was one more thing she had to tell Bonnie. “You should go talk to Mrs. Flowers. You saw how much Power you have, and she’ll be able to teach you how to use it. I expect you to be crazy-powerful seven years from now.”

“Aye aye, Captain,” Bonnie said, saluting ridiculously. Then her gaze slipped past Elena and Elena turned to follow it.

Stefan was crossing the parking lot toward them. Elena and Bonnie exchanged a glance.

“I’ll tell the others to wait. Take your time,” Bonnie said, and slipped into the car.

Elena walked slowly toward Stefan. As she reached him, he looked down into Elena’s eyes. There were no words worthy of expressing what either of them felt.

Elena wanted to take him in her arms and hold on tight, but she didn’t. He wasn’t hers now.

She might never see him again. The thought filled her with an almost painful sorrow, but not with the angry bewilderment she'd felt at his death. Now she had the chance to say good-bye.

Stefan's green eyes searched hers, as if he was looking for answers. "I wanted to say thank you," he said finally. "Damon and I are leaving. We've decided to go back to Italy for now. I wanted—we wanted—to see what's left of the Florence we remember." His lips quirked up in a half smile. "We'll see if we can find more of our humanity there, I suppose."

Elena nodded. "I'm glad," she said.

He reached out and took her hands, so gently and carefully that Elena's heart ached with longing. "What can I do to thank you?" he said slowly.

Elena squeezed his hand once, fiercely, and then pulled away. "You don't need to thank me," she said, hearing the roughness of almost-tears in her own voice. "Just take care of Damon. And of yourself."

She turned toward the car where her friends were waiting, and Stefan touched her on the shoulder. "Will I see you again?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I don't think so. But just ... keep going, okay? For yourself, and for Damon. Remember that there's someone out there who cares about you, the real you."

"You are a mysterious one, Elena Gilbert," Stefan said. With one last nod of appreciation, Stefan turned to go.

Hot tears were running down her cheeks as Elena watched Stefan walk out of her life forever. But Elena wasn't sad, or not only sad. This Stefan might live. And that made it all worthwhile.



As Elena rode home in the backseat of Matt's car, her thoughts drifted to the one person she hadn't gotten a chance to say good-bye to. Maybe it was for the best. She didn't know how she'd say good-bye to Damon.

In the front seat, Matt and Meredith were laughing, talking about the Haunted House. They'd missed *everything*. With luck, they'd never know about vampires, never be touched by the darkness all around them. They'd be normal. Happy.

Bonnie jostled Elena gently. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

Elena sighed and laid her head on her friend's shoulder, just for a moment.

Bonnie wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "You helped them. From what you told me, I think you've saved a lot of people."

"Yeah," Elena said, her voice small. She blinked back the sting of tears in her eyes. She'd saved herself, too. Stefan. Damon.

In the big picture, it didn't matter if she never got to say good-bye to Damon, if she never saw either Salvatore brother again. Not if they all got to live.

When they pulled up to her house, Elena hugged all three of her friends again, fast and hard, before climbing out of the car and waving good-bye.

Aunt Judith had left the porch light on for her, but the windows of the house were dark. They must already be in bed.

As Elena crossed the lawn, a dark shape detached itself from the shadows beneath the quince tree and came toward her.

"Damon," she said, happiness flaring up inside her, hot and sudden.

Damon came close and looked at Elena for a few moments without speaking, his black eyes unreadable. "I suppose I should say thank you," he said at last.

"You're welcome," Elena said, holding his gaze steadily.

“You’re no coward,” Damon gave her his quick, devastating smile.

Elena smiled back, and Damon took her by the arm and led her to her front porch. “More comfortable here,” he said, sitting down on the porch steps, and Elena sat beside him. She was still wearing the Red Riding Hood cloak, and she was glad of its warmth.

Damon tilted his head back to look at the stars. “I suppose Stefan told you we’ve decided to go back to Italy,” he said conversationally. “He seems to think that things might get sticky here, with the fire and the graveyard desecration and all that.” Damon lifted one shoulder in a graceful shrug.

“I can imagine,” Elena said. She let herself lean into him a little bit. She felt as if her heart was, very quietly, breaking.

“Come with us,” Damon said suddenly. “I have this strange feeling that it would be a terrible mistake to leave you behind.”

He was still looking up at the stars, as intensely as if he could read the future written in the sky. The moonlight and the porch light combined threw shadows across his face, softening Damon’s aristocratic features and the stubborn set of his mouth.

“Oh, Damon,” Elena said. Tears started to pool in her eyes.

Damon tore his gaze away from the sky and looked at her, his eyes dark and more open than she had ever seen them in this time. “Come,” he said again. “Please.”

“I can’t,” Elena said. Damon flinched and, on an impulse, she put out one hand and covered his heart. “You’re good,” she told him furiously. “In here. You can be so good, so *wonderful* if you decide to be. Don’t forget that.”

Tears ran down Elena’s face, hot on her cold skin. She scrambled to her feet and backed away toward the front door.

“Good-bye, Damon,” she said quickly, longingly. His face was full of confusion, and he started to rise, but she was already closing the door behind her.

Elena leaned against the door and just let the tears fall. Every part of her yearned to go with Stefan and Damon.

What if she did? Would she wake up in a future where she and Damon and Stefan had been traveling Europe together, a happy triumvirate, for the last seven years?

No. Elena shook her head. She wasn’t going to be selfish like that, not the

way she'd always been selfish with the Salvatore brothers. She'd seen where it led. She wasn't going to make Katherine's mistakes. Not again.

Wiping her eyes, Elena peered out the window by the front door, but Damon was gone.

Her shoulders slumped and Elena started up the stairs, feeling unutterably exhausted.

Margaret's trick-or-treat bag was in the hall outside her door, stuffed with candy, and Elena smiled a little.

Turning into her own bedroom, Elena kicked off her shoes and lay down on the bed, not bothering to change into her nightgown.

A tear slipped out from under her eyelids and ran slowly down her cheek. But a certain peace settled over Elena, and as she fell into a slumber, she knew without a doubt that, as much as it hurt, she'd done the right thing.



Elena woke up in a room flooded with light. The white ceiling above her was unfamiliar, outlined with ornate crown molding. Sitting up, she looked around. She was in a big bed heaped with soft pillows and a thick duvet. Sunlight streamed in through full-length windows at one end of the room, which opened onto a tiny balcony she could just see from the bed.

Hopping out of bed, Elena wiggled her toes against the thick pale carpet and padded out barefoot to examine the rest of the apartment. She wasn't in the clothes she'd fallen asleep in anymore, she realized, but in crisp white cotton pajamas. Elena ran a hand across them wonderingly.

It wasn't a big apartment: bedroom, bathroom, a kitchen with a small dining alcove at one end, a little living room with a large, cushy pale green couch. Everything looked peaceful and comfortable in light, neutral shades, accented with forest green or jewel blue. Paintings hung on the walls—not posters, but real paintings, a couple of them abstract, one an intricate landscape, another a charcoal sketch of a young girl's face. The apartment felt like a nest, a retreat made just for one. Just for her.

It felt like home, she realized, even though she'd never seen it before.

She rummaged through the kitchen, finding coffee and figuring out the intimidatingly complicated brushed-steel coffee maker. While it brewed, she went back into the bedroom to get dressed. Everything in the closet seemed simple and chic, more sophisticated than the old Elena had been used to, and she pulled on a pair of close-fitting black trousers and a light blue top made of impossibly soft fabric.

Picking up a hairbrush, she looked into the mirror and froze. For a moment, she held her breath, examining the almost-stranger in the mirror.

She looked *older*. Not too old, but like she was in her mid-twenties. Her hair was shorter, falling just past her chin, and there were a few tiny lines beginning at the corners of her eyes, as if she'd been squinting in the sun. Elena tilted her head, watching the swing of her hair against her cheek. She

looked good, she thought.

In the life she'd lived with Stefan, Elena had drunk the Waters of Eternal Life and Youth at age eighteen, and stopped getting older. Stopped changing. She hadn't wanted to age while Stefan stayed young, had wanted to be by his side for eternity.

It had been the right choice when they had been together. After Stefan had been killed, it had seemed like living death to go on without him forever, to never grow old or have the possibility of having children. Now she would get to *change*. She had grown up, and she would keep aging.

As she turned away from the mirror, Elena's gaze fell upon something on her bedside table that she hadn't seen before: a golden ball, just the right size to fit comfortably in her palm. Picking it up, Elena pressed the catch and watched the ball unfold into a small golden hummingbird set with gems.

The music box Damon had given her.

Was it possible? Had they found each other again, somewhere in the intervening years between Fell's Church and now? Her heart began to pound wildly, full of hope.

Carefully, she put the music box back on the table. There was a crisply folded note next to where it had stood. Elena picked the note up with shaking hands and unfolded it.

Well done, Elena. Here is a small souvenir of your past life, as a token of our regard. Enjoy your humanity—you've earned it. I hope you find your true destiny. Mylea

The Celestial Guardians had given her a piece of the life she had lost. It was a kind gesture, she knew, but it pierced a whole in her heart. A token could never replace the love she had sacrificed. No home could be home without someone to share it with.

Stepping out onto the balcony, Elena gazed over the city before her, and felt her mouth drop open. Far away, over the rooftops, she could just glimpse the Eiffel Tower.

"Hideous," she suddenly remembered Damon saying, that last day together in Paris. "A truly tragic streetlamp."

Elena stifled a giggle. *She* thought it was beautiful, anyway.

Wow. She lived in *Paris*.

Energized, Elena turned to the task of figuring out just who Elena Gilbert was in this new future. She rifled through her drawers, read her own papers, sorted through the mail. Rummaging through the cupboards and refrigerator, she devoured the chewy bread, soft cheese, and crisp fruit she found inside.

By the time a couple of hours had passed, she knew that she worked at an art gallery. She had an undergraduate degree in art history, from the Université de Paris. Apparently, Elena had come to Paris for a junior year abroad from the University of Virginia—not Dalcrest College—and never left, finishing her education here.

She had lived alone in this apartment for two years, according to her lease. There were notes from friends in both English and French—and it was a relief to realize that she could read French much more fluently than she had been able to in her old life. Elena smiled over a gossip birthday card from Aunt Judith that made it clear that she and Robert and Margaret were just as happy in this life as in Elena’s previous one.

There was no sign of any romance. Elena’s heart ached a little at that. But who could she have loved after the Salvatore brothers?

Just as Elena was sweeping papers back into her desk drawers, there was a tapping at her front door.

Leaping up, Elena rushed toward it. It was Bonnie, she was sure of it, or Meredith. She could picture them here. Meredith probably had helped Elena pick out the chic outfits. Bonnie must have cast a protection spell over the whole apartment.

She flung open the door.

“Elena!” said the dark-haired girl on the other side, her arms full of shopping bags. Elena had never seen her before. She kissed Elena enthusiastically on each cheek in greeting. “Can I leave these here? Come on, we’ll be late.”

She said it all in French, very fast, and Elena was relieved to realize she spoke and understood French as well as she read it.

A name popped into Elena’s head, along with a remembered warm affection. “Veronique,” she greeted her friend. “Where are we going?”

Veronique made a little moue of pretended offense. “You forgot our Sunday lunch?” she asked. “The others are probably already there.”

The restaurant at which they had lunch was as stylish and tasteful as the

rest of Elena's new life. The two friends waiting for them there were as lovely as Veronique was. They jumped to their feet and kissed Veronique and Elena on both cheeks, laughing. Elena laughed with them, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that these were people she loved.

She just wished she could remember them properly.

After a few minutes she got them all straight. Veronique was talkative and bossy, with a quick, good-humored smile. She was a stockbroker, and she and Elena had been roommates in college. Elena had a flash of memory: Veronique, softer and younger, her hair tied up in a sloppy bun, hollow-eyed from staying up late studying for exams.

Lina was quieter and more soft-spoken, with huge dreamy eyes and long light-brown hair. She worked at the gallery with Elena and was the niece of the owner.

And Manon, sharp-witted and sarcastic with very short, very pale blonde hair, was a graduate student at the Sorbonne, doing a joint degree in art history and law. She had gone to university with Elena and Veronique.

"If you want to get further with art history," she was advising Elena, "you should come back to school. The museums will never hire someone with only an undergraduate degree."

"Perhaps," Elena said, sipping her wine. She hadn't found school particularly interesting back in the life she remembered. There had been too much else to do: monsters to fight, the ongoing drama of her love life to manage.

Maybe here, studying something she loved, with the idea that it would actually help her get a particular job ... She felt excitement blossom in her chest. She could tell from the way Manon was talking that the Elena these girls knew was serious about her career.

Lina began to describe a show she and Elena were organizing at the gallery to the other girls, and Elena listened, eyes wide.

"It was Elena who suggested arranging the pieces by the models instead of chronologically," Lina said. "A very interesting effect. He used the same models over and over, for years, and you can see the women growing older, just as his art developed."

Elena felt a flush of pride. Even though she didn't remember it, apparently she was good at her job.

“Let’s talk about something more interesting than art,” Veronique said eventually. “Elena. Are you going to go out with Hugo again?”

Hugo? Elena tried to prompt the memory that had given her the names of her friends, but came up blank. “I don’t know,” she said slowly.

In unison, all three girls sighed.

“He’s such a nice man,” Lina said, tucking a long lock of hair behind her ear. “And he’s crazy about you.”

“I will take him off your hands if you don’t want him,” Manon said. “That lovely man, just going to waste.” She rolled her eyes exaggeratedly, laughing.

“Obviously, you shouldn’t date anyone you don’t want,” Veronique added, “but it seems like you’re never even open to the *idea* of love.”

Elena didn’t know what to say. Even without memories of this time, she knew why she wasn’t looking for love, why she wasn’t falling for the lovely man they were talking about. How could she? She had left her heart with Damon and Stefan, wherever they were. Finally, she shrugged. “Sometimes it’s not meant to be, I guess.”

“We worry about you,” Veronique said flatly. “It’s like you’re waiting for something, and we don’t want you to let life pass you by.”

Looking back at her Parisian friends, Elena was hit by a sudden rush of homesickness. Meredith and Bonnie would have fussed over her and nudged her in just the same way. Where were they now? Had the vow they had sworn in the churchyard, to be friends forever, come true? *I hope so*, she thought. *I hope I haven’t lost everyone from my old life, even if I’ve lost ... even if I can’t have ...*

“Oh, we didn’t mean to make you sad,” Lina said softly, laying a warm soft hand over hers. “It will all come right in the end.”

* * *

When she came back from lunch, the apartment seemed entirely too quiet. Elena wandered through the flat, touching the sleek pale furniture, rearranging the books and ornaments.

It was exactly the kind of place she’d always dreamed of. And yet, she felt terribly wistful.

She was reminding herself of Damon, she realized. How he had brushed his fingers across her possessions, opened drawers to peer inside, inspected her photographs. Like him, she was trying to figure out the person who lived

here.

Elena laughed a little and wiped her eyes. The person who lived here had a wonderful life. Elena just wasn't sure if it was really hers.

In the kitchen, she found an invitation held by a magnet to the refrigerator, something she'd somehow managed to overlook on her first rummage through the apartment.

Elena read: "... invite you to the wedding of their daughter Bonnie Mae McCullough to Zander—" She stopped.

Zander? She could feel a smile beginning on her face.

Some things must be destined after all.



Amazing. Despite everything that had changed, Bonnie was not only marrying the same guy, she'd chosen the same bridesmaids' dresses. As she waited to walk down the aisle behind Bonnie's two older sisters, Elena carefully straightened the long rose pink gown and held her bouquet—pale lilies and bright roses—at waist level.

This time, though, the wedding was in the church Bonnie's parents attended, and there seemed to be a lot more people in attendance. Elena looked over the crowd, picking out faces she recognized: Sue Carson, Bonnie's dad's business partner, Mrs. Flowers. Apparently, when Bonnie's mom and sisters had time to get involved, things got a lot more elaborate.

Someone struck up the wedding march, and the bridesmaids began to file in, first Bonnie's sisters; then Shay, Zander's second-in-command in the Pack; then a girl Elena didn't know who had been Bonnie's roommate at Dalcrest College; then Meredith, head held high, stepped down the aisle.

Meredith looked terrific. Confident and elegant, her beautiful thick dark hair piled on top of her head. And she was *human*. Elena let the spreading joy of that fact run through her. The changes Elena had made back during those fateful few months in high school had saved Meredith.

When it was Elena's turn, she raised her head high, held her flowers low, and stepped carefully and slowly, just the way she'd been told. At the front of the church, she took her place next to Meredith and looked over at the guys' side of the aisle.

It was all werewolves—Matt and Zander must not be good friends here—jostling one another rowdily, but they stilled and came to attention as Zander lifted his head, pushing his pale blond hair out of his eyes, and saw Bonnie.

She looked beautiful. She came down the aisle on her father's arm, draped in creamy lace. Pink rosebuds were twined in her hair. Bonnie and Zander gazed at each other, and they both looked so incredibly happy that Elena's breath caught in her throat.

“Dearly beloved,” the minister said, and Elena listened with only half an ear as she watched Bonnie and Zander take each other’s hands and smile at each other, a warm, private smile.

Elena had gotten a chance to talk to Bonnie last night after the rehearsal dinner. She and Meredith and Bonnie had sat up half the night in Bonnie’s room, talking things over, just like old times. When Meredith had stepped out for a minute, Elena had turned to Bonnie and breathed, “Bonnie, the last thing I remember before two weeks ago was Halloween night in Fell’s Church.”

Bonnie had squealed and leaped up to hug Elena. It was such a relief to have just one person to share this huge secret with, Elena thought, watching as Bonnie began to speak her vows, promising to have and to hold.

Things hadn’t changed that much for Bonnie in this life. She was a witch, she had gone to Dalcrest, she taught kindergarten, she loved Zander, she lived in Colorado. She was happy. Perhaps a little softer and gentler than the Bonnie Elena had known in the future she’d left behind. This Bonnie hadn’t been through so much, hadn’t seen her friends die.

Meredith, on the other hand, had changed. Elena cast a sideways glance at her gray-eyed friend. Meredith was so much happier here. She didn’t know anything about the supernatural, Bonnie had quietly confirmed. Well, she knew Bonnie said she was psychic, and was sort of New Agey with candles and herbs, but Meredith thought it was all a game. It was, Bonnie and Elena agreed, better that way.

Meredith had graduated from Harvard Law School. She was going to take the bar next month, and she wanted to work for the public defender’s office in Boston. She wasn’t a hunter. She wasn’t a vampire.

Last night, when they’d been sharing gossip and updating one another on their lives, Meredith, eyes shining, had told them about the work she’d done with some of her classmates and professors, researching the cases of prisoners on death row that hadn’t been handled properly, trying to prove the innocence of people who had been wrongly convicted.

“You’re saving people,” Elena had said, impressed. “Like a warrior.” Meredith had blushed with pleasure. It didn’t matter if she hunted monsters or not, Elena realized. Meredith was always going to find a way to be a hero.

“You may kiss the bride,” the minister said, and Bonnie leaned up as Zander leaned down and they wrapped their arms around each other and kissed, tenderly.

Unexpectedly, tears welled up in Elena's eyes and she bit her lip, hard, to force them away.

She was so happy for Bonnie, she told herself fiercely. And her own life was wonderful, everything she would have dreamed of in a world where she didn't have to hunt monsters, didn't have to be a Guardian.

It was just that, the last time she'd been in Bonnie's wedding, she'd felt the brush of Damon's admiring regard from his seat in the audience.

Bonnie and Zander were heading down the aisle, leaving the church, and it was time to follow them. Elena took the arm of her werewolf groomsman—Spencer, the preppy one—and laughed politely at his joke without really hearing it.

Outside, it was early evening, and the leaves were just beginning to change. There was a briskness in the air, the beginning of fall. Fall, again. The last time she'd been in Fell's Church in the fall was seven years ago, although it only felt like a few weeks, the night she'd said good-bye to Stefan and Damon.

They were out there somewhere—probably—and she should be glad of it, *was* glad of it, fiercely glad that they were still alive.

She felt that wistfulness again, stronger still, at the beginning of the reception, when Jared, Zander's best man, started his toast.

"Uh ..." the shaggy-haired werewolf began, "when Zander started dating Bonnie, we all thought she was awesome, but we were like, 'Really?' because she wasn't, uh, the same kind of person we were." Looking around the circle of faces smiling at him, Jared's eyes went wide and panicky.

This was the same toast Jared had given in that other world, so Elena knew he'd be able to pull it together. But that time, Damon's eyes had met Elena's, and she had felt Damon's rich amusement coming straight through the bond between them. They'd both laughed at the same time, quiet laughter at an inside joke.

At this wedding without that bond, without Damon, Elena felt slightly adrift.

After the toast, she and Meredith picked up their place cards and found their tables at the reception. There was someone already sitting there, and Elena grinned with delight. "Matt!"

Matt—bigger and broader than the last time she'd seen him, but with the

same open, friendly face—got to his feet and hugged them both. Beside him, a tiny woman, almost as tiny as Bonnie, jumped to her feet and hugged them, too, blond curls bouncing over her shoulders.

“This is Jeannette,” Matt said proudly.

“I’ve heard so much about you!” she said, excitedly to Elena. “Matt and I keep saying we’re going to come to Europe and see everything you’ve been e-mailing him about since college. The gallery and all.”

Sue Carson and her husband and a couple of Bonnie’s college friends came to join them at the table, and the next few minutes were full of greetings and introductions.

“I’m going to get another drink,” Jeannette said brightly after a few minutes, hopping up from the table. “I know you want a beer, honey, and can I get anyone else anything?”

Matt watched her walk away with a fond, proud smile. “She’s great, isn’t she?” he asked. “Did I tell you she’s finishing up vet school? And not just poodles and things. She’s going to be a large animal vet. As little as she is, she can handle a bull or a wild horse.”

“She seems terrific,” Elena said, sipping her wine. She was happy for Matt, but she couldn’t help missing Jasmine, the girlfriend he’d had for so long in the world she remembered. Maybe not everyone had a soul mate.

A thick band across one of Matt’s fingers caught her eye, and she leaned forward suddenly, shocked. “Matt Honeycutt! Is that a *Super Bowl* ring?”

Matt blushed, and Meredith stared at her in disbelief. “Honestly, Elena,” Meredith said. “I know you live in France, but don’t you even hear who wins the Super Bowl?”

Elena was momentarily dumbfounded, but Matt just rubbed at the back of his neck, embarrassed. “It’s not a big deal,” he said. “I’m not first string, I only played for a little while.”

“Are you kidding?” Elena said, and got up to hug him. “It’s a huge deal.” She held onto him tightly for a moment. He was happy and successful. Even without Jasmine. *Maybe this is his true destiny.*

Time passed and Elena drank wine and talked to familiar faces. Dinner was served, salmon or steak, and the DJ began to play. Bonnie and Zander came out onto the dance floor for their first dance, gazing up into each other’s eyes. Elena was watching their dance from the half-empty table when she looked

up and saw a familiar face. *Alaric*.

He was listening to Meredith, his sandy head inclined politely as she talked, a smile on his handsome, boyish face.

Alaric Saltzman had been called in by some of the citizens of Fell's Church to investigate Mr. Tanner's death. He had taken over as their history teacher to investigate the possibility of vampires being behind Tanner's murder.

In a world where Mr. Tanner had lived, Alaric had never come to Fell's Church. They had never met him.

So why was he at Bonnie's wedding? Why was he talking to Meredith?

"Who's that with Meredith?" she asked, leaning across the table toward Matt and interrupting his conversation with Sue Carson. They both looked.

"I don't know," Matt said, and Sue shook her head. "One of Zander's friends, probably."

As they watched, Meredith took Alaric's hand and pulled him out onto the dance floor.

"He's cute," Sue said. "They look good together."

"Excuse me," Elena said, pushing back her chair and getting up.

When she found Bonnie flitting about happily between tables, the redheaded girl hugged her enthusiastically. "Was that not the best wedding?" she asked.

Zander's smile widened. "She's been saying that to everyone," he said affectionately. "I totally agree, of course, but I might be biased."

"It was a wonderful wedding," Elena agreed, "but actually I wanted to ask you, how do you know Alaric Saltzman?" On the dance floor, Alaric said something softly in Meredith's ear, and she tossed her head back and laughed.

"Alaric? Oh, the High Wolf Council called him in to consult on some problem they had a while ago," Bonnie said vaguely. "He and Zander got to be friends."

Zander added, "He's a really good guy. Meredith's okay with him."

"How do you know Alaric Saltzman?" Bonnie asked curiously.

"Oh." Elena shifted uncomfortably. It was way too much to explain, especially in a crowded reception hall. "It's complicated. I'm sure he won't know who I am."

“Huh. *Oh*,” Bonnie said, getting it. “One of those kind of friends. Out of the past. Or a different time, anyway.” Zander frowned, looking slightly bemused, but he didn’t say anything.

“Yes,” Elena said. “Exactly.”

A few minutes later, the photographer came over to ask Bonnie and Zander to pose with a table of Bonnie’s cousins, and Elena went back to her own table. From across the room, Elena watched as Alaric and Meredith danced, and then got a drink at the bar together, laughing and leaning toward each other, Meredith reaching up unconsciously to push twirl a falling tendril of her own hair around her finger as she smiled up at him. When they went out on the dance floor again, Alaric was holding Meredith’s hand firmly in his.

Elena took another sip of wine, but it suddenly tasted bitter.

She was happy for her friends. She truly was. They deserved every happiness, both of them, and Zander and Alaric were perfect partners.

But, despite that, Elena felt like the walls she’d built up inside herself were breaking, cracking, letting a flood of misery spill through her, one small stream at a time. She put down her wine glass and clenched her hands together, willing back the tears. She wasn’t going to make a scene at Bonnie’s wedding.

But she would grow old and die, and she would never know what had happened to Damon and Stefan. If they’d stuck together.

She might love each of them. Did love them, had a thousand memories of love, but they were only hers. They wouldn’t remember.

A lump was rising up in her throat, and she knew with sudden, devastating certainty that she was about to cry after all.

“Hey,” Matt said, leaning toward her. “Elena. Are you okay?”

“Of course,” Elena said, her voice brittle and cracking. “I always cry at weddings.”

“Sure,” Matt said. “Come dance with me, then. You don’t mind, do you, Jeannette?”

“Of course not,” Jeannette said lightly, looking at Elena with sympathetic, intelligent eyes. “I’m going to see if I can track down a waiter to bring me more of those tiny crab cakes.”

His big hand securely holding hers, Matt led Elena to a distant corner of the dance floor and wrapped his arms around her. Elena pressed her face against

his shoulder, glad of the warm, reassuring bulk of him.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Matt asked softly, and Elena shook her head, not looking up.

Matt held onto Elena tightly, and she let the tears flow, her face buried in his shoulder where no one could see.

At least I still have this, she thought, sniffing. *At least I still have my friends.*



Dear Diary,

The last four days in Virginia were wonderful ones. I went up and stayed with Aunt Judith and Robert in Richmond and spent some time with my baby sister. It's so hard to believe that Margaret's in middle school now. When I think about her, I still imagine that four-year-old with the big blue eyes, but she hasn't been that little girl for a long time. We went with Aunt Judith and got our nails done together, and Meggie even told me about a boy she likes! How can she have grown up so fast?

Elena glanced up from her diary and out the tiny, rounded window as the wheels of her plane jolted as they landed on the runway. The sky at Charles de Gaulle airport was gray and drizzly, and just suited her mood. Elena sighed drearily and turned back to the diary.

I was thinking about moving back to Virginia. I'd get to see my baby sister grow up. Aunt Judith would be happy, and even Robert would be pleased.

I've got a life in Paris, of course. Friends. A job I love.

And none of it feels like mine.

The plane was taxiing to the gate, and Elena looked absently out the window again, watching the hubbub of the airport—catering trucks, baggage handlers, other planes shining wet with rain—without really seeing them.

I decided I ought to give it a chance, though, she wrote slowly. That last night, Damon called me brave. Running back home would be just about the farthest thing from brave I can imagine.

I chose this life, even if I can't remember it.

And wherever I live, I'll have to try to figure out how to be normal. Wasn't that something I longed for, all those years?

It's not the only thing I ever wanted. Not by a long shot.

But it's the only one I've got.

Up at the front of the plane, the door opened and the other passengers climbed to their feet, surging toward the exit. Elena closed her diary and tucked it in her purse, then stood up and pulled her carry-on out of the overhead bin and, squaring her shoulders, followed the other passengers out of the plane. She was going to be brave.

The airport was crowded with hurrying passengers and, despite being in Paris, managed to have the same soul-deadening atmosphere as any big airport. Fluorescent lighting hummed overhead and the smell of disinfectant was everywhere. There was a headache building up behind Elena's eyes. Maybe she was getting sick. Elena sniffed experimentally, feeling sorry for herself.

Heading for the baggage claim, all at once she saw him, and her whole inside jolted in instant, eager recognition.

No. It was impossible.

But there he was, standing by a magazine stand, looking just the way she remembered him. Strong and graceful and so beautiful, one of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen. He was wearing a beautifully cut black jacket, and he held himself like the aristocrat he'd been born as. Elena couldn't breathe. If she moved, this might be snatched away from her.

Elena knew the exact moment when he saw her, too, and his whole body stiffened in shock. His eyes were wide and his lips were slowly turning up into a smile of amazement.

And then she was in motion, moving straight toward him, her high-heeled boots clacking on the tiled floor, her carry-on rattling along behind her on its little wheels.

He was coming toward her, too, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on her.

This is it, Elena realized, stopping stock-still in front of him and staring dumbly up into his face. This is who I'm meant to be with. My destiny caught up with me after all.

"Hello, Elena." Damon's mouth twisted into its telltale smirk, and Elena knew she was home.

[#TVD13TheEnd](#)

About the Author



L. J. Smith has written a number of bestselling books and series for young adults, including *The Vampire Diaries* (now a hit TV show), *The Secret Circle*, *The Forbidden Game*, *Night World*, and the *New York Times* #1 bestselling *Dark Visions*. She is happiest sitting by a crackling fire in a cabin in Point Reyes, California, or walking the beaches that surround that area. She loves to hear from readers and hopes they will visit her updated website at www.ljanesmith.net.